

2009

The politics of sectional servitude : the construction of American abolitionist discourse in black and white, 1837-1847

Christopher M. Florio

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*The Politics of Sectional Servitude:
The Construction of American Abolitionist Discourse in Black and White, 1837-1847*
by
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Honors Thesis
in
Department of History
University of Richmond
Richmond, VA

4 May 2009

Advisors: Eric Yellin, Robert Kenzer

To Grandpa

and

To Mom

Acknowledgments

“Will you remember to pay the debt?” was the last question that Socrates ever asked, and I should hate to leave him disappointed. My thanks, then, to the Gilder Lehrman Institute of American History and to the University of Richmond: their generous support allowed me to spend a summer immersed in the study of abolitionist discourse. Thanks also to the folks at Boatwright’s InterLibrary Loan Services, to Debbie Govoruhk for the copy card, and to Jim Gwin for his conscientious emails.

I want to thank those professors who have taken the time to take an interest in my work. Terri Halperin, Woody Holton, Sydney Watts, and Hugh West provided valuable insights as this project was just getting off the ground. Ana Mitric and Kevin Pelletier guided me through the labyrinth of modern literary scholarship, and they offered excellent editorial suggestions. Nancy Schaubert explained how change (and “instantiation”) happens. John Treadway and Ellis West taught me how to be a good student, and, more importantly, a good person. Nicole Sackley helped me to appreciate the ostensibly apolitical, and she took time out of her busy schedule to deliver excellent second edits. Tze Loo dispensed bananas, knowledge of hegemony, and an attention to ethical action. My two advisors, Robert Kenzer and Eric Yellin, are deserving of my utmost gratitude. It was Dr. Kenzer’s example that convinced me to study history, and it has been his unceasing and outstanding mentorship that has impelled whatever successes I have achieved. Dr. Yellin is my academic role model. He has transformed the way I think about history, and his compassion has proved to me that a superb advisor can also be a wonderful friend.

Above all, I should like to thank those individuals whose friendship and love have enabled my scholarship. I thank Kara Schultz for her kindness from across an ocean. I thank Ashley Benson for her good humor from the adjoining desk. I thank my roommates – Dan, Fig, and Joe – for putting up with me when I had to study, and for knowing when to tear me away. And I thank my family, most especially my grandfather and my mother. It is to them – to their devotion, their sacrifices – that I dedicate this thesis.

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"I have done the state some service, and they know't."

- William Shakespeare, *Othello*, V.ii

Introduction

At an 1859 gathering of the Massachusetts Anti-Slavery Society, the formerly pacifist Wendell Phillips delivered a stridently bellicose address. He exulted that “every five minutes gives birth to a black baby,” because “in its infant wail I recognize the voice which shall yet shout the war-cry of insurrection; its baby hand will one day hold the dagger which shall reach the master’s heart.”¹ Historians have suggested that Phillips’s speech epitomized a general shift in abolitionist sentiments, arguing that the 1850 Fugitive Slave Law and the 1857 Dred Scott decision convinced erstwhile “nonresistants” to endorse a more violent brand of abolitionism.² My thesis complicates the foregoing analysis. I grant that proslavery advances spurred abolitionist militancy, but I seek to reinterpret the political underpinnings for this change in tactics. How did militant abolitionism develop over time? And what was militant abolitionism meant to convey?

I argue that American political discourse surrounding abolition and slavery, sectional politics and violent insurrection, coalesced in the 1840s. The merger of such ostensibly disconnected streams of thought began with the perception of a new political need, as abolitionists came to believe that southern plantation elites had constructed a hegemonic proslavery order.³ Their interpretation of northern consent to southern domination impelled a

¹ *The Liberator*, 4 November 1859.

² See, for example, David Brion Davis, *Inhuman Bondage: The Rise and Fall of Slavery in the New World* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2006), 265-6.

³ My understanding of hegemony derives from Antonio Gramsci’s distinction between “the ‘spontaneous’ consent given by the great masses of the population” and “the apparatus of state coercive power which ‘legally’ enforces discipline”; from Chantal Mouffe’s conception of a “hegemonic class” as “a class which has been able to articulate the interests of other social groups to its own by means of ideological struggle”; and from Raymond Williams’s assertion that “a lived hegemony is always a process” that has “continually to be renewed, recreated, defended, and modified.” I began to think about the abolitionist perception of proslavery hegemony after reading David Brion Davis’s claim that the abolitionists of the 1840s “discovered how closely the social order was tied to slavery.” Antonio Gramsci, *Selections from Prison Notebooks* (London: Lawrence and Wishart, 1978), 12; Chantal Mouffe, “Hegemony and Ideology in Gramsci” in *Gramsci and Marxist Theory*, ed. Chantal Mouffe (London: Routledge,

proliferation of abolitionist possibilities, possibilities that were intended to sever the connection between national politics and the peculiar institution. Initially disseminated by freed blacks but subsequently appropriated by northern whites, these possibilities crossed the color line and challenged the political status quo. They presented a route to sectional power through a practice of insurrectionary politics.

Building upon the historical scholarship that privileges the role of African-American slaves in fashioning a war for emancipation out of a struggle for union, my thesis analyzes the prior, discursive revolution that transformed northerners' understanding of antebellum politics.⁴ I contend that this transformation, no less than the transformation of wartime policy toward slavery, resulted from interaction between black and white actors. Though the interaction I explore was primarily intellectual, I maintain that it nevertheless resulted in what the historian Daniel T. Rodgers has termed "the successful meeting of social need and imaginable public solution."⁵ Before black slaves made a slave insurrection out of the Civil War, black and white abolitionists remade northern political consciousness.

My thesis identifies three individuals who intervened decisively in the refashioning of northern identity: John Quincy Adams, the sixth President of the United States, and, later, a Massachusetts Congressman; Henry Highland Garnet, an escaped slave cum abolitionist; and Jabez Delano Hammond, a New York judge obsessed with sectional politics. Taken together, their speeches and writings promoted a conception of what I term the politics of sectional servitude. Garnet expanded upon Adams's analysis of sectional relations, and Hammond upon

1979), 181; Raymond Williams, *Marxism and Literature* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1977), 112; Davis, *Inhuman Bondage*, 263.

⁴ The foremost account of the self-emancipation thesis is found in Ira Berlin et al., *Slaves No More: Three Essays on Emancipation and the Civil War* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1995).

⁵ Daniel T. Rodgers, "An Age of Social Politics" in *Rethinking American History in a Global Age*, ed. Thomas Bender (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2002), 263.

Garnet's, so as to emphasize northern subservience to southern oppression. Their assessments suggested that the North was enslaved to the South, and they indicated that a sectional political coalition might afford the only means to breaking the fetters of proslavery supremacy.

Chapter one of my thesis traces the emerging perception of northern political enslavement, following Adams's efforts in the late 1830s to rescind the congressional Gag Rule against antislavery petitions. As representatives from both southern and northern states denounced his "insurrectionary" attempts to protest the gag, Adams responded by channeling his understanding of southern slavery to interpret the political relationship between North and South as one akin to the relationship between slave and master. Abolitionists, who shared Adams's insights into the moral degeneracy of slavery, subsequently amplified this explanation for the political status quo and attempted to connect the need to liberate white northerners with the need to emancipate black slaves. Chapter two considers the abolitionist response to southern political dominance, and it examines the possibilities that Garnet articulated in the early 1840s for challenging proslavery rule. Garnet charged that northerners could undermine the proslavery national order through political means, or, if their efforts failed, bondsmen could destroy slavery through violent revolt. Chapter three analyzes how Hammond synthesized the need that Adams had presented and the possibilities that Garnet had advanced through a literary performance of blackface. Authoring a fictitious slave narrative in which he appropriated the rebellious undercurrents of slave discontent, he formulated a discourse of political insurrection and a program for sectional politics that gained traction – and proved destructive – in the 1850s.

Even as I study antislavery political discourse, I have attempted, above all, to render an expansive conception of antislavery political action. The historian Steven Hahn has argued that the political "encompasses collective struggles for...socially meaningful power," and I have

worked to underscore the political resonances of the diverse struggle against southern domination.⁶ The white women who signed antislavery petitions thus participated in politics, although they lacked the franchise. So too did the freed blacks who debated abolitionist tactics, although they deliberated outside of Congress. And so too did African-American slaves. Their experience in bondage provided the contextual framework upon which northern sectional identity was constructed. Their suffering demonstrated an enslaved America; their resistance, the potential to escape it.

⁶ Steven Hahn, *A Nation Under Our Feet: Black Political Struggles in the Rural South from Slavery to the Great Migration* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2003), 3.

CHAPTER 1:

John Quincy Adams and the Perception of Northern Bondage

In February 1837, former president and current congressman John Quincy Adams attempted to endorse a slave's right to petition Congress only to discover the extent of northern sectional servitude. Congress's Gag Rule against antislavery petitions had been passed less than a year prior, but abolitionists – men and women, black and white – continued to inundate their delegates in the United States House of Representatives with appeals protesting the institution of slavery. Adams had persisted in reading these petitions because he deemed the gag an abridgement of the God-given right to supplication, and he had sought to introduce “a petition of slaves that slavery should *not* be abolished” in order to accentuate the inhumanity of barring anyone, and any opinion, from entering public discourse.⁷

But the responses his ploy elicited from both slave-state and free-state representatives compelled him to revise his perception of the injustices that undergirded the Gag Rule. Southern congressmen attacked Adams as an insurrectionary who, by daring to grant slaves a public voice, had threatened the political status quo that preserved the Union. Several of these southerners went so far as to advocate that Adams be censured for his incendiary stunt. Few of Adams's northern colleagues supported the motion for censure, yet not a single representative from a free state defended his decision to support the right of slaves to petition. Taken together, the southern interpretation of his efforts as insurrectionary and the northern assent to this proslavery claim led Adams to two discomfiting conclusions: that northern representatives consented to southern

⁷ *Register of Debates*, 24th Congress, 2nd Session, 1837, 1595. It should be added that Adams did not doubt the authenticity of the petition – which had been sent to him from Fredericksburg, Virginia – though he believed that the slaves' owners had coerced the bondsmen to sign it. See John Quincy Adams to the Inhabitants of the Twelfth District of Massachusetts, 3 March 1837, reprinted in *The Liberator*, 31 March 1837.

political domination, and that southerners were attempting to render their domination absolute by reducing recalcitrant northerners to a state of political servitude.⁸ Northerners were allowing their political “freedom of action” to be “interdicted” by southern “despotism.”⁹

It was through his understanding of black slavery that Adams came to imagine northern bondage. Although he was wary of the prospects for racial reordering in the United States, Adams had observed firsthand the cruelties that slave traders inflicted upon African Americans in Washington, and he had concluded as early as 1820 that nothing “can be more false and heartless than this doctrine which makes the first and holiest rights of humanity depend on the color of skin.”¹⁰ This insight into slavery’s moral degeneracy led Adams to endorse a slave’s right to voice political claims, but it also enabled him to interpret the Gag Rule controversy as a northern struggle for political liberation. Above all, it spurred Adams to champion the need to

⁸ In many ways, Adams’s arguments corresponded to the notion of a “slave power,” an idea developed in the 1830s and diffused in the 1850s that suggested that a cabal of proslavery southerners were attempting to control the federal government and subvert northern liberty. While the slave power concept indicated the conspiratorial threat of southern oppression, Adams emphasized its current political reality; in other words, the notion of a slave power suggested the possibility of proslavery domination, but Adams was underscoring its prevalence. For a concise definition of the slave power see Jonathan H. Earle, *Jacksonian Antislavery and the Politics of Free Soil, 1824-1854* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2004), 8, 43-4. See also Matthew Mason, *Slavery and Politics in the Early Republic* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2006), 231; John Stauffer, *The Black Hearts of Men: Radical Abolitionists and the Transformation of Race* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2004), 27, 117-18; Leonard L. Richards, *The Slave Power: The Free North and Southern Domination, 1780-1860* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 2000), 1-27; Eric Foner, *Free Soil, Free Labor, Free Men: The Ideology of the Republican Party before the Civil War* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1995 [1970]), 73-102; William W. Freehling, *The Road to Disunion: Secessionists at Bay, 1776-1854* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1990), 313; William E. Gienapp, “The Republican Party and the Slave Power” in *New Perspectives on Race and Slavery in America*, ed. Robert H. Abzug and Stephen E. Maizlish (Lexington: University Press of Kentucky, 1986), 52-77; Michael F. Holt, *The Political Crisis of the 1850s* (New York: W. W. Norton & Company, 1978), 184-5; David Brion Davis, *The Slave Power Conspiracy and the Paranoid Style* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State Press, 1969).

⁹ *Register of Debates*, 24th Congress, 2nd Session, 1837, 1675, 1682.

¹⁰ *Memoirs of John Quincy Adams, Comprising Portions of his Diary from 1795 to 1848*, vol. 5, ed. Charles Francis Adams (Philadelphia: J. B. Lippincott & Co., 1875), 11; William Jerry MacLean, “Othello Scorned: The Racial Thought of John Quincy Adams,” *Journal of the Early Republic* 4 no. 2 (Summer, 1984): 143-160, 153; Paul Goodman, *Of One Blood: Abolitionism and the Origins of Racial Equality* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1998), 21-2.

free northerners from southern domination – a domination that was national in scope and powered by slavery.¹¹

Adams gestured toward these positions in the speech he gave to defend himself against the resolutions of censure, and he began to develop them more fully in the public letters he sent to his constituents in the years to follow. Time and again he suggested that even though the institution of black slavery was confined to the southern states, proslavery sentiment had been nationalized through northern acquiescence to southern repression. Publicizing these arguments, in turn, drew Adams ever closer to the abolitionist movement, for abolitionists shared the awareness of black enslavement that had allowed Adams to connect their petition campaign to the need for northern liberation. Many abolitionists began to relate the need to liberate white northerners back to the previously established need to abolish black slavery. And many began to underscore the northern espousal of proslavery ideology by portraying Adams as the sole bulwark against absolute proslavery rule.

By the early 1840s, Adams's interpretations had permeated abolitionist discourse, and his analysis of the political relationship between North and South as one akin to the relationship between master and slave had begun to gain traction, so much so that in 1842 a group of citizens from Adams's home district sent him a petition praying for the dissolution of the Union. Once again southerners responded to Adams's presentation of a controversial petition by pushing to censure him. The manner in which Adams now constructed his defense, however, revealed both the extent of his alignment with the abolitionist movement and the limits of his emancipationist

¹¹ Paul Goodman claims that white northerners came to embrace antislavery sentiments as a result of their "personal relations and firsthand contacts" with African Americans, while Matthew Mason argues that Adams's conception of the "sectional politics of slavery" and his "offensive against slave representation.... originated from a sense of sectional oppression." I want to connect Mason's argument to Goodman's and suggest that Adams's understanding of sectional oppression originated from his prior understanding of black oppression. See Goodman, *Of One Blood*, 36; Mason, *Slavery and Politics*, 217-18.

vision. For on the one hand, Adams welcomed the help of noted abolitionist Theodore Weld in crafting speeches that framed the need for northern sectional liberation; on the other, Adams refused to accept disunion as a legitimate mechanism for escaping southern domination. He could not envision a program for sectional politics, but he insisted that the North challenge the South without dissolving the Union. His work to combat the Gag Rule thus culminated in the dissemination of a political need that lacked an obvious political solution. This chapter traces Adams's efforts to understand and articulate this need, as he helped to create a discourse essential to northerners' political emancipation even if he did not get there with them.

Abolitionists of the 1830s conceived of slavery as a peculiarly southern institution with a peculiarly southern base of support, but they nevertheless began to send antislavery appeals to their own congressional representatives. This move signified a pragmatic shift in tactics, as abolitionists recognized both the failure of their antislavery mailing campaign to the South and the success of the antislavery petition movement in Britain. Imitating the British model, American abolitionists began to author petitions that requested such objects as the abolition of slavery in Washington, DC, and legislation to curb the interstate slave trade – issues over which Congress at least theoretically possessed purview – in the hope of stimulating debate over slavery and encouraging southerners to hear their emancipationist pleas.¹²

But southern congressmen refused to listen. Abolitionism in the United States was, in the words of the historian David Brion Davis, “pathetically weak,” but by 1835 slave-state

¹² James Brewer Stewart, *Holy Warriors: The Abolitionists and American Slavery* (New York: Hill and Wang, 1976), 69-70, 82; William Lee Miller, *Arguing About Slavery: John Quincy Adams and the Great Battle in the United States Congress* (New York: Vintage Books, 1995), 93-112; David Brion Davis, *Inhuman Bondage: The Rise and Fall of Slavery in the New World* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2006), 259.

politicians at the national level perceived a potential threat to their slaveholding interests.¹³ For these southerners understood that a successful defense of slavery required a careful balancing act. They appreciated that slavery in America had always been confronted by some degree of antislavery opposition, but they believed that abolitionism might transform the tentative antislavery sentiment of the past into a substantive antislavery interest. The need to reaffirm America's status as a "slaveholding republic" became all the more important in this increasingly uncertain context, and southern members of the House pushed to pass a rule that would interdict the problematic petitions.¹⁴

Prohibiting abolitionist petitions constituted a tacitly unconstitutional task, but slave-state representatives deemed the current deluge of petitions a threat so dire that they ignored legal impediments to their proslavery project. As South Carolina Representative James Henry Hammond declared in December 1835, he would not allow the "rights of the Southern People assaulted day after day, by the ignorant fanatics from whom these memorials proceed."¹⁵ In 1836, then, a special select committee chaired by another South Carolinian, Charles Pinckney, recommended that the best way to prevent the impertinent abolitionist petitions from causing

¹³ Davis, *Inhuman Bondage*, 280. In making this argument I do not mean to follow Eugene Genovese and Elizabeth-Fox Genovese in suggesting that a homogenous "mind" of a southern "master class" existed, nor do I mean to imply that all southerners held the same – or even similar – opinions about slavery. My more limited claim is that the southern elites who held positions within the federal government were, above all else, committed to the preservation of slavery. See Elizabeth Fox-Genovese and Eugene Genovese, *The Mind of the Master Class: History and Faith in the Southern Slaveholders' Worldview* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2005).

¹⁴ Don E. Fehrenbacher asserts that a "slavery interest" – "concentrated, persistent, practical, and testily defensive" – had been initially arrayed against an "antislavery sentiment" – "diffuse, sporadic, moralistic, and tentative." See Don E. Fehrenbacher, *Slavery, Law, and Politics: The Dred Scott Case in Historical Perspective* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1981), 15. The phrase "slaveholding republic" comes from the title of Fehrenbacher's last book. See Don E. Fehrenbacher, *The Slaveholding Republic: An Account of the United States Government's Relations to Slavery*, completed and ed. Ward M. McAfee (New York: Oxford University Press, 2001), 296. The context in which the southern representatives operated was all the more uncertain because at the same time abolitionist petitions were challenging proslavery political power, the introduction of free labor farming practices in the Border States was challenging slavery's economic foundations. See Barbara Jeanne Fields, *Slavery and Freedom on the Middle Ground: Maryland during the Nineteenth Century* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1987), 63-89.

¹⁵ *Congressional Globe*, 24th Congress, 1st Session, 1835-1836, 27.

trouble was to table them automatically without discussion; they were to be received only to be stifled. After some debate – several southerners, including Hammond, believed that the resolution did not respond strongly enough to the petitions (they would have preferred to reject the petitions outright) – Pinckney’s proposal passed by a vote of 117-68. What would come to be called the Gag Rule had been adopted as a standing rule of the House, and through various incarnations it would remain in effect for the next nine years.¹⁶

One representative who did not vote for the Gag Rule was John Quincy Adams, and on February 6, 1837, Adams addressed Speaker of the House James Polk and inquired whether he might present a petition “from twenty-two persons, declaring themselves to be slaves.”

Attempting to circumvent the gag was nothing new for Adams. Since its inception he had habitually requested permission to read petitions that were sure to foment debate over slavery.

Yet Adams had never gone so far as to ask to read a petition signed by slaves – even a petition that held that slavery “should *not* be abolished” – and Polk found himself at a loss for words.

Unlike the southern politicians who had aimed the Gag Rule at white antislavery petitioners, Adams refused to assume that African Americans were barred from political discussions.¹⁷

¹⁶ Miller, *Arguing About Slavery*, 141-5, 210; Elizabeth R. Varon, *Disunion! The Coming of the American Civil War, 1789-1859* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2008), 109-10; James M. McPherson, “The Fight Against the Gag Rule: Joshua Leavitt and Antislavery Insurgency in the Whig Party, 1839-1842,” *Journal of Negro History* 48 no. 3 (July, 1963): 177-195, 177-8. This chapter is concerned with the *perception* of a need, and it therefore does not attempt to offer statistical substantiation for Adam’s claims regarding southern political domination and northern political servility. For an analysis of the Gag Rule controversy that foregrounds a quantitative breakdown of the relevant votes, see Richards, *The Slave Power*, 107-161 (esp. 111, 132, 138) and Leonard L. Richards, *The Life and Times of Congressman John Quincy Adams* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1986), 124-5. In the latter work, Richards argues that “Adams was never alone in battling the gag rule.” Southern representatives fixated upon Adams, however, because he was not merely attempting to subvert the gag with his vote but was consciously attempting to rally his northern colleagues and the northern public against their proslavery program. In addition, Adams himself was careful to note that subservience to proslavery interests was not unique to northern “Doughface” Democrats, at one point remarking that “the slave-trading representation, and their Northern auxiliaries, Whig and Democrat,” were arrayed against him. See *Congressional Globe*, 27th Congress, 2nd Session, 1841-1842, 163.

¹⁷ *Register of Debates*, 24th Congress, 2nd Session, 1837, 1587, 1595; William W. Freehling, *The Road to Disunion*, 344; Varon, *Disunion!*, 111.

If Speaker Polk could not bring himself to respond to Adams's unprecedented maneuver, other southern representatives wasted no time in claiming the floor and excoriating Adams for his latest indiscretion. Charles Haynes of Georgia led off, declaring that Adams's insubordination to the spirit of the Gag Rule had "reached a height...impossible to express." Adams had committed such an "indignity" in attempting to grant slaves a public voice that another Georgia representative, Julius Alford, moved that the petition be taken from the House and burnt "as an act of justice to the South." Alford asserted that Adams's constant attempts to upset the proslavery status quo needed to stop else the Union would soon cease to exist.¹⁸

As the discussion continued, southerners began to portray Adams's actions not merely as impolitic but as insurrectionary. South Carolina's Waddy Thompson was the first to formulate such a portrayal. He announced that Adams was "in open and willful violation" of both the proslavery sentiments of his colleagues and the proslavery rules of the House, and he then asked whether Adams knew that "there are laws in all the slave states, and here, for the punishment of those who excite insurrection." The implication of his question was clear. By endeavoring to give voice to slaves within the halls of Congress, Adams had undermined the basic southern assumption that slaves could only be known through their master. He had used the apparatus of the national government, which southerners deemed a proslavery instrument, to voice a decidedly antislavery claim, and the "incendiary" Adams required "condign punishment" as a result.¹⁹

Over the next several days slave-state politicians accentuated Thompson's characterization of Adams as an incendiary. On February 7, yet another Georgia representative, Hopkins Horsley, declared that Adams's "crusade" to subvert the Gag Rule represented a

¹⁸ *Register of Debates*, 24th Congress, 2nd Session, 1837, 1587-8.

¹⁹ *Register of Debates*, 24th Congress, 2nd Session, 1837, 1591.

“defiance” so utterly inconsistent with the proslavery spirit of the federal union that it warranted a formal rebuke from the House. For “with a parricidal and sacrilegious hand,” Adams had attempted to “sap the foundations of the temple reared by our ancestors.” “From a deliberate design of agitation” he had assailed the “indisputable right of slaveholders,” and if his “volcanic” activities – most strikingly manifested in his attempt to present a petition from slaves – were not sanctioned, then they would soon undermine the rule of law that protected the institution of slavery. Like Horsley, Robert French of Kentucky argued further that if Adams prevailed in expounding “the grievances of the abolitionists” within the House, then the end would be “the overthrow of government.”²⁰

John Claiborne of Mississippi offered the most violent depiction of Adams’s treachery. Summarizing the southern denunciation of Adams after a week’s worth of proceedings, Claiborne proclaimed that Adams, the “avowed organ” of the abolitionists, had advanced an outrage “long matured, maliciously devised, and boldly perpetrated” against the Gag Rule, which had been passed only to ensure tranquility in the House and in the country. As a result of his conscious and malevolent violation of the House’s standing rules, Adams mirrored the “midnight incendiary” who “fires the dwelling of his enemy, and listens with pleasure to the screams of his burning victims.” According to Claiborne and the speakers whose arguments he was augmenting, Adams represented a threat to the sanctity of slavery, and the attempt to present a petition from slaves had illuminated the extent of his menace. Adams was not merely a meddler but an incendiary. He was not simply challenging the Gag Rule but was attempting to overturn the ideology that it was meant to sustain.²¹

²⁰ *Register of Debates*, 24th Congress, 2nd Session, 1837, 1620-1.

²¹ *Register of Debates*, 24th Congress, 2nd Session, 1837, 1661-2, 1693, 1695.

Southern representatives refused to tolerate Adams's attempt to destabilize the proslavery bent of the national government, and over the next two days they debated ways to punish him. Several representatives from the deep South introduced resolutions to censure Adams for his "open defiance of the [C]onstitution and the indisputable rights of slaveholders." Congressman Haynes presented the first of these resolutions, but his colleague, Dixon Lewis of Alabama, argued that Haynes's wording was not severe enough in its condemnation. He therefore presented his own resolution for censure, which asserted that Adams had committed an "outrage" upon southern rights and had manifested a "flagrant contempt" of House procedure. Lewis and other southerners were quick to add that if this sort of activity were not condemned, then the rights of slaveholders as guaranteed them by the Constitution would be eviscerated. More than that: the foundations of the Union would be uprooted, because the rights of slaveholders were interwoven with those foundations.²²

A few southerners and a majority of northerners refused to support the push to censure Adams, both because it threatened freedom of speech in the House and because the representative to be censured was, after all, John Quincy Adams. Yet even these dissenters agreed that Adams's activities warranted deep disapproval, and the disapproval verged on condemnation when it emanated from northeastern representatives. Abijah Mann, a Democrat from New York, delivered a long speech on the day Adams introduced the petition that set the condemnatory tone for subsequent northerners to follow. Mann claimed that he was defending Adams against the motions of censure, but his defense was backhanded at best. He admitted that he was only willing to pardon the "deplorable spectacle" of Adams presenting the "abolitionist petitions of his infatuated friends" because he believed the effects of old age were clouding

²² *Register of Debates*, 24th Congress, 2nd Session, 1837, 1593.

Adams's judgment. More important to Mann than offering up excuses for Adams's impropriety, though, was assuring southern representatives of the North's continued allegiance to the peculiar institution of their "southern brethren." He underscored the "good faith of the people of the North" to abide by their agreement never to challenge "the domestic institutions...of others." Adams was thus an aberrance, and Mann took pains to join ranks with southerners and frame Adams's efforts against the Gag Rule as manifesting "a degree of violence paralleled only by revolutionary madness of desperation." Disagreeing with the southern attempt to censure Adams, Mann made sure to stress that Adams had been wrong to defend the slave's right to petition.²³

Few northerners even went so far as Mann in defending Adam's actions, and it was left to Adams himself to justify the claim that slaves possessed the same right as every other American to send petitions to Congress. The crux of his justification relied upon natural rights theory, upon the idea that the "sacred right...of begging for mercy" could not be denied even "the poorest, the humblest, and the most wretched."²⁴ At the same time he defended a slave's right to petition, though, he also began to formulate a response to the vituperative language that southerners had used to characterize him. Slave-state representatives had called him an incendiary; they had framed his denunciation of the Gag Rule as illicit defiance. Consequently, even as he continued to defend the propriety of the petition he had brought to the attention of the House, Adams drew a parallel between the condition of the slave petitioners and the condition of abolitionist petitioners. Southerners sought to prohibit slaves from petitioning Congress, yet they had already prohibited white northerners from petitioning Congress about the subject of slavery. When it came to questioning proslavery principles, Adams declared, the rights of white

²³ *Register of Debates*, 24th Congress, 2nd Session, 1837, 1597-8.

²⁴ William Lee Miller offers an incisive analysis of this argument in Miller, *Arguing About Slavery*, 256-270.

northerners were “limited” by the same “peculiar distinctions” that limited the rights of slaves. For in both cases the right to petition rested “on the footing of political privileges.” Slaves could not be allowed to petition, southerners had argued, because it would open “the whole subject of the condition of slaves in the country” – which was precisely the rationale that southerners had used to substantiate the need for the Gag Rule. Adams continued throughout his speech to juxtapose the revocation of the slaves’ right to petition and the abridgment of the right of those expressing “infamous” opinions to petition. He never made the point explicit, but it was there, underlying his overarching argument: though the political enslavement of whites was qualitatively distinct from the far more total enslavement of blacks, white northerners possessed the same right as slaves to challenge slavery: they possessed no right at all.²⁵

Southern politicians were thus working not merely to impede but to outlaw the espousal of abolitionist principles, and in this light, their conception of Adams as an incendiary made sense because he refused to consent to the codification of proslavery dominance. He had been willing to present petitions “not entirely agreeable” to southern representatives – he had refused to allow his “freedom of action” to be “interdicted” by proslavery “despotism” – and he had therefore been castigated as an “enemy to the Union.” Yet southerners were not alone responsible for the despotism he found himself confronting. Indeed, Adams was careful in his speech to stress his “anxiety” that “*every* member of the House” (emphasis added) should “record his vote, for all time to come” upon “the whole subject relating to slavery.” Their votes needed to be reported so that northerners could see whether their representatives had kowtowed to a southern agenda, as many had done in voting for the Gag Rule, and voted to uphold a proslavery program so “barbarous” that it denied the “humble privilege” of petition to “the

²⁵ Adams’s speech is found in *Register of Debates*, 24th Congress, 2nd Session, 1837, 1673-83.

poorest and meanest human creatures.” Adams had already argued that southerners were attempting to suppress the liberties of white northern petitioners in the same way they suppressed the liberties of their slaves, and he now sought to show that northern representatives were complicit in this process.²⁶

Adams developed these notions of southern political domination and northern political complicity in the months following this congressional episode, and he strove to make known to the northern public the need for a sectional reorientation of politics. Writing to Gerrit Smith, one of the abolitionist movement’s leading bankrollers, Adams emphasized the ubiquitous “measure of Northern servility to southern servitude.” The “whole slave representation in both Houses of Congress” had arrayed against the right to petition in order to quell debate over slavery, but the larger issue for Adams was that “all the individual ambition in all the free States” had been “enlisted” to bolster southern suppression of antislavery activity. Northern congressmen were so willing to enlist under the proslavery banner, Adams continued, because “it was well known that no man holding or even suspected of holding...adverse opinions” would garner enough support from the South’s political powerbrokers to attain a leadership position in Washington. The current president, New York native Martin Van Buren, served as a case in point, for he had only won over the slave representation – and thereby won the presidency – after “proclaiming as his only fundamental maxim of policy” that he would veto any legislation that tended toward the abolition of slavery. Beyond Van Buren and his fellow Democrats, Adams maintained that northern subservience to proslavery principles “pervaded all the political parties, and their leaders.” Building upon the arguments he had first advanced while defending himself against the

²⁶ Ibid. In the end, the southerners in favor of censuring Adams could not muster nearly enough support, even among their fellow slave-state representatives, to pass a resolution to that effect. Undeterred, they subsequently offered up a second resolution holding that “slaves do not hold the right to petition secured to the people of the United States by the Constitution” This resolution passed by a vote of 162-18. See *Register of Debates*, 24th Congress, 2nd Session, 1837, 1733-4.

motion of censure, Adams now presented an explanation for southern political supremacy at the national level: the espousal of proslavery sentiments constituted a prerequisite to political advancement, and northern representatives were consequently “spell-bound by the Talisman of Ambition to sustain...slavery.”²⁷

Adams’s reflections upon the relationship between northern and southern politicians were not confined to his private correspondence. In a series of open letters to his constituents, Adams underscored the same arguments he had offered to Smith, reflecting his belief that representatives from slave states, with the ready assent of northern congressmen, were attempting to subjugate antislavery northerners. Within these letters Adams repeatedly noted that southern slaveholders were attempting to undercut the freedom of white northerners, yet he also avowed that their attempts to enact “enormous abridgements” of northern rights met with success only because their “political northern associates” had consented to such enactments. “The people of the FREE states” therefore bore responsibility for the Gag Rule – “a Resolution compounded of southern slavery, and northern subserviency” – and for the “degeneracy of an age...languishing into servitude” that the gag portended. The attempt to censure him for persisting to present abolitionist petitions was but the leading edge of proslavery despotism. Adams claimed that if northerners continued to “support by their suffrages the men, who have truckled to southern domination,” if northerners continued to “choose to be represented by slaves,” then they would soon find “the manacles of...slavery fastened upon your hands...and the fetters of...slavery upon your feet.” Adams used his public letters to accentuate the extent to which northern politicians had been placed under the yoke of their southern colleagues, and he

²⁷ John Quincy Adams to Gerrit Smith, 5 April 1837, GLC06315, Gilder Lehrman Collection, New York City.

argued that northerners needed to challenge this suppression or else their own suppression would soon be absolute.²⁸

Channeling Adams's interpretation of the national political environment, many abolitionists began to publicize the threat that southern political supremacy posed to the liberty of white northerners. At an 1837 meeting of the Massachusetts Anti-Slavery Society, Wendell Phillips proclaimed that northerners had become so familiar with slavery that they were no longer aware of its "deadening influence on the body politic." Abolitionists consequently needed to contend against slavery not merely on behalf of the blacks in bondage but to ensure that "it may not result in northern slavery."²⁹ Less than a year later, at the Society's sixth annual meeting, participants passed a resolution that echoed Phillips's sentiments, declaring that the people of the free states – "without distinction of sect, party, or sex" – had to unite in protest against the Gag Rule because the spirit that animated the gag was "inseparable from slavery." A subsequent meeting of the Old Colony Anti-Slavery Society in Quincy, Massachusetts, similarly resolved that the Gag Rule represented "the most fearful assault upon the liberties of the people" and called for "the determined resistance of those who mean to be free," while another of their resolutions held that the contest over the Gag was for the freedom of white northerners "not less than for the deliverance of the enslaved."³⁰

²⁸ John Quincy Adams to the Inhabitants of the Twelfth Congressional District of Massachusetts, 3 March 1837, reprinted in *The Liberator* 31 March 1837; John Quincy Adams to the Editors of the Quincy Patriot, 18 March 1837, reprinted in *The Liberator*, 14 April 1837; John Quincy Adams to the Inhabitants of the Twelfth Congressional District of Massachusetts, 20 March 1837, reprinted in *The Liberator* 28 April 1837; John Quincy Adams to Samuel Webb and William H. Scott, 19 January 1838, reprinted in *The Liberator*, 1 June 1838; John Quincy Adams to Edmund Quincy, 28 July 1838, reprinted in *The Liberator* 11 August 1838; John Quincy Adams to the Inhabitants of the Twelfth Congressional District of Massachusetts, reprinted in *The Liberator* 24 August 1838; John Quincy Adams to Isaac L. Hedge, Seth Sprague, Jr., and Elibu Hobart, 27 October 1838, reprinted in *The Liberator*, 9 November 1838.

²⁹ *The Liberator*, 14 April 1837.

³⁰ *The Liberator* 2 February 1838; *The Liberator* 16 February 1838.

This last point – that challenging the Gag Rule meant championing the freedom of white northerners as well as the freedom of black slaves – expanded upon the parallel that Adams had drawn between slaves and abolitionist petitioners. He had used the southern representatives' disavowal of the slaves' right to petition to illustrate the extent to which southerners were working to reduce northerners to a state of political bondage, and abolitionists now argued that supporting abolition meant supporting liberation for both “our BRETHREN at the SOUTH” and for “us.”³¹ The choice was liberty for all or chains for all, and as New York abolitionist William Goodell argued in an essay that was reproduced in *The Liberator*, northerners needed to “claim and exercise the rights which give you more than a nominal distinction from the SLAVE” – precisely the rights that southern representatives had circumscribed with the Gag Rule – in order to continue to advocate for the abolition of slavery. Under the interpretation that Adams had articulated and abolitionists had since adopted, the gag illuminated the lengths that the southern political elite would go to protect the institution of slavery. Yet it also indicated that the first step toward combating chattel enslavement in the South was to challenge political servitude in the North.³²

Just as abolitionists followed Adams in framing the struggle over the Gag Rule as a struggle against the encroachment of slavery into the North, so too did they follow him in privileging the role that northern politicians played in facilitating that encroachment. In this

³¹ Michael F. Holt does not address the larger point that the individuals who first conceived of white servitude were those who best appreciated the conditions of black bondage, arguing instead that the discourses of white enslavement and black enslavement were not potentially dialectical but mutually exclusive. See Holt, *The Political Crisis of the 1850s*, 134-5. Eric Foner notes that “Abolitionists could now argue that slavery was not only morally repugnant, it was incompatible with the basic democratic values and liberties of white Americans.” I want to expand upon this assertion and argue that it was by thinking about black slavery that whites came to conceive of white slavery, of the loss of the values and liberties to which Foner alludes. Eric Foner, “Politics, Ideology, and the Origins of the American Civil War” in *Politics and Ideology in the Age of the Civil War*, (New York: Oxford University Press, 1980), 41.

³² *The Liberator*, 14 September 1838; *The Liberator*, 10 May 1839.

instance, however, embracing Adams's argument spurred abolitionists to embrace Adams himself. They had always endorsed him to some extent because of his willingness to challenge the gag, yet his reluctance to adopt the abolitionist platform as his own – Adams held that the abolition of slavery in the District of Columbia would do more harm than good for the antislavery cause, for example – provoked considerable criticism from the abolitionists whose right to petition he defended. But as they listened to Adams and came to accept the assertion that northern congressmen were, in the words of the abolitionist poet John Greenleaf Whittier, “meek, pliant poltroons, only fit/To work a master's will,” they began to see Adams as something more than an infuriatingly cautious ally: they began to see him as an increasingly powerful symbol.³³

Adams, after all, had long been considered a political maverick. As a young senator he had broken ranks with the Federalists and voted in support of the Louisiana Purchase, and he had continued to disassociate himself from partisan allegiances ever since.³⁴ His widely reputed political independence consequently presented an apt contrast to the political subservience of his northern colleagues, and abolitionists seized upon this reputation in order to depict Adams as the sole champion of the North against southern despotism. In a speech given at the fifth annual meeting of the Massachusetts Anti-Slavery Society, Henry B. Stanton announced that abolitionists should assail every national politician except one – John Quincy Adams – because he “belongs to no party.” Unlike those northerners who offered up “the most sacred rights...on the altar of despotic power” as a means to improve their partisan standing, Adams's independence of party politics allowed him to vote with his conscience in defending the right to

³³ The full text of Whittier's poem can be found in *The Liberator*, 25 January 1839. For more on the initial relationship between Adams and the abolitionists, see Miller, *Arguing About Slavery*, 354-7.

³⁴ Samuel Flagg Bemis, *John Quincy Adams and the Foundations of American Foreign Policy* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1969), 111-134.

petition for the abolition of slavery. Adams's ability to illuminate the pervasiveness of his colleagues' servility thus worked to bolster his own antislavery credentials.³⁵

Abolitionists had drawn closer to Adams, and the effects of their increasingly cohesive alliance were felt in early 1842. For on January 25, Adams presented to the House a petition that reflected the extent to which his interpretation concerning the politics of sectional servitude had permeated the minds of antislavery northerners. The petition was from the citizens of Haverhill, Massachusetts, one of the towns in Adams's home district, and it prayed that Congress "will immediately adopt measures peaceably to dissolve the Union of these States." Enumerating the reasons for their prayer, the petitioners argued that no union "can be agreeable or permanent" without "reciprocal benefits," and because "a vast proportion of the resources" of the free states was "annually drained to sustain the views and course" of the slave states, the petitioners pronounced secession as the only means that would prevent slaveholders from "overwhelm[ing] the whole nation in utter destruction."³⁶ The petitioners were channeling the arguments that Adams had taken pains to accentuate over the past several years, yet they were pushing those arguments to their logical conclusion. If, as Adams had continually asserted, the North had to free itself from southern despotism, then the surest means to this end was the dissolution of the union that enabled and perpetuated proslavery domination.

As had been the case in 1837, southerners were quick to condemn him. So much did the past repeat itself that one slave-state representative, Virginia's George Washington Hopkins, asked if it was in order to move that the petition be burned, while another southerner, Thomas Marshall of Kentucky (the nephew of the former Chief Justice), presented a resolution to censure Adams for committing "moral treason" against the United States government. Whereas the

³⁵ *The Liberator*, 11 February 1837.

³⁶ *Congressional Globe*, 27th Congress, 2nd Session, 1841-1842, 168.

previous movement to censure Adams had been extemporaneous, however, Marshall's proposal was part of a deliberate plan to silence "Old Man Eloquent" once and for all.³⁷ And now that Adams had presented a controversial petition, which attempted to array the North against the South and thereby subvert the proslavery balance of the Union, slave-state representatives had the pretext they needed to move against him.³⁸

Proslavery congressmen were not alone in marshalling an organized initiative. In the months leading up to Adams's presentation of the Haverhill petition, the few antislavery members of the House had begun to board together, and, led by the recently-elected Joshua R. Giddings of Ohio (whom Adams was quick to call "a kindred soul"), they formed a "Select Committee on Slavery" to advance a coherent platform in opposition to slaveholding interests.³⁹ The congressmen soon joined forces with Joshua Leavitt, an abolitionist who had travelled to the Capitol to lobby for the abolitionist cause, and also with Theodore Weld, an abolitionist of considerable repute whom they hired to serve as their researcher. Although the members of this burgeoning political action committee – which came to be called the Abolition House – were earnest in their ideals, they lacked the clout to mount a public offensive against slavery on their own. As a result, Giddings and company moved quickly to enlist Adams's assistance.⁴⁰

When Adams confronted this latest attempt to censure him, therefore, he was not alone in crafting his defense. Beginning on January 25 and continuing throughout the week of February

³⁷ During the course of the proceedings, Marshall readily admitted that a meeting of "some forty or fifty [House] members" had selected him to serve as spokesman during the impending offensive against Adams. See *Congressional Globe*, 27th Congress, 2nd Session, 1841-1842, 211.

³⁸ *Congressional Globe*, 27th Congress, 2nd Session, 1841-1842, 174-5.

³⁹ The other members of the committee were William Slade of Vermont, Seth M. Gates of New York, and Sherlock J. Andrews of Ohio. Only Slade had been a member of Congress when southerners had last attempted to censure Adams. See Miller, *Arguing About Slavery*, 376; Samuel Flagg Bemis, *John Quincy Adams and the Union* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1965), 423.

⁴⁰ McPherson, "The Fight Against the Gag Rule," 186-8; Miller, *Arguing About Slavery*, 404-8; Bemis, *Adams and the Union*, 423-4.

2, he claimed the floor to defend himself and presented speeches that he had drafted and rehearsed with Weld's help. His speeches returned to now familiar themes: that over the past decade southern congressmen had forced their "detested principles of slavery" upon northerners; that the "auxiliaries of the 'peculiar institutions'" – particularly but not limited to northern members of the Democratic Party – had enabled such "extraordinary and odious despotism" with their subservience; and that a proslavery coalition was now endeavoring to "get their chains" upon him for refusing to sacrifice the right to petition. But this time these themes were better developed, as Weld provided Adams with empirical evidence to bolster his usual talking points. Adams could now defend his sectional understanding of politics by reading from an abolitionist pamphlet that argued that Virginia was inferior to New York "in population, wealth, and resources, because of the existence of slavery"; he could now underscore the extent of the "slavery prejudice" by furnishing a copy of the *National Intelligencer* – Washington's leading political newspaper – that censured Adams's recent speeches in order to "expurgate [his] exposure of the conspiracy of the South to force slavery on the free States." Adams had employed abolitionist petitions to reveal the extent of proslavery domination, but he was now employing a fuller abolitionist apparatus to drive this revelation home.⁴¹

Illuminating the ways in which southern politicians controlled politics at the national level, Adams articulated the need for the North as a region to liberate itself from the South's subjugation. Yet he could not bring himself to accept the solution that the petitioners from Haverhill had proffered. Even as he moved that the petition be referred to the appropriate committee, he added that the committee should report an answer explaining the reasons why its prayer should not be granted. Adams was sympathetic to the revolutionary principles upon

⁴¹ *Congressional Globe*, 27th Congress, 2nd Session, 1841-1842, 170, 208, 212-3; Miller, *Arguing About Slavery*, 440, 444; Bemis, *Adams and the Union*, 432-3.

which the petition was predicated – in the midst of the deliberations he instructed the clerk to read the first paragraph of the Declaration of Independence – but he repeatedly stated that it “was not yet time” for the “emphatically oppressed” northerners to seek the redress of their grievances through disunion. He agreed with the petitioners that the remedy enumerated in America’s founding document “to destroy the Government, if it becomes oppressive to them,” was applicable in the “state of things that exists.” He parted with the petitioners, however, that this was the correct remedy to employ. The son of parents who had played a central role in creating the Union was not about to advocate that it be broken up. As the historian William Lee Miller suggests, “the continuity of the United States of America under [the] Constitution stood at the core of his values.” Adams’s vision for northern emancipation was thus constrained by his political imagination. He had rejected disunion, but he could not imagine a mechanism for northern emancipation short of secession. He could not conceive of a sectional reorientation of politics within the existing national framework.⁴²

In a period of five years Adams had conceived of, articulated, and popularized a belief in the politics of sectional servitude. His sympathy with the plight of African Americans had initially impelled him to present the petitions that abolitionists had sent him, and soon thereafter he found himself castigated as a dangerous insurrectionist with the malevolent desire to uproot the foundations of the Union. The tenor of these castigations, coupled with his insight into the character of American slavery, ultimately revealed to him the nature and the extent of proslavery domination within the national government. As a result of this realization, he came to argue that southern politicians were reducing northerners to a state of political bondage, while their

⁴² *Congressional Globe*, 27th Congress, 2nd Session, 1841-1842, 170; Miller, *Arguing About Slavery*, 355.

northern colleagues were permitting them. As Adams worked to insert these arguments into antislavery discourse, abolitionists began to see him as their foremost political ally. The culmination of this *entente* between abolitionists and Adams was Adams's alliance with the Abolition House, which then led Adams and Weld to work side-by-side in arguing against the 1842 motion of censure.

Their efforts were successful – the resolution to censure Adams was tabled – but theirs proved a pyrrhic victory. Many Americans, both inside of Congress and out, continued to characterize Adams as an incendiary; in July of 1842, one group of Ohioans went so far as to pass their own personal resolution declaring “that Nat Turner, and John Quincy Adams, the brightest stars of modern Abolitionism, the one is dead, and the other damned.”⁴³ Within the House, moreover, the southerners who had attempted to censure Adams succeeded in censuring Giddings. The gag continued to stifle discussions of slavery in the next session of Congress. And Adams, who was soon to admit that he was “not the chosen instrument to accomplish [the Lord's] great undertaking,” continued to privilege the need for northern emancipation without explaining the political means through which to achieve it. By the end of 1842, Adams had managed to identify the fetters that held the North in bondage, yet he could not conceive of the tools he required to break them.⁴⁴

⁴³ *The Liberator*, 8 July 1842.

⁴⁴ John Quincy Adams to Lewis Tappen, 15 July 1845, GLC03891, Gilder Lehrman Collection, New York City.

CHAPTER 2:

Henry Highland Garnet and the Possibilities of Political and Insurrectionary Emancipation

Henry Highland Garnet spent his life searching for the means to strike a killing blow against slavery. Garnet had escaped bondage alongside his parents at the age of nine, and his efforts to spur emancipation consistently reflected the urgency of a fugitive. By no means a dogmatic black nationalist, he was above all else a purveyor of potential abolitionist solutions, not an adherent to a single abolitionist program.⁴⁵ The solutions Garnet articulated in the early 1840s constituted a pragmatic response to the problem of northern servitude.

Concluding that the plantation elites who had enslaved his family had also enslaved the North, Garnet reconceived of northern subjugation to suit his own abolitionist ends. As he developed an interpretation of the North's enslavement that underscored its relevance to black emancipation, he strove to extend the connection that John Quincy Adams and his abolitionist cohorts had drawn between sectional and human bondage. Garnet contended that the peculiar institution of the South enabled the political domination of the North, and he worked to conceptualize possibilities that would liberate slaves and northerners simultaneously.

In a series of well-publicized speeches delivered to antislavery conventions between 1840 and 1843, Garnet advanced both political action in the North and slave resistance in the South as potential responses to southern domination.⁴⁶ Challenging the Garrisonian orthodoxy that

⁴⁵ Historiographical convention has tended to package Garnet as antebellum America's quintessential black nationalist. This portrayal holds especially true in Earl Ofari, *'Let Your Motto Be Resistance': The Life and Thought of Henry Highland Garnet* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1972), and to a lesser extent in Joel Schor, *Henry Highland Garnet: A Voice of Black Radicalism in the Nineteenth Century* (Westport: Greenwood Press, 1977).

⁴⁶ Patrick Rael calls Garnet one of the "true celebrities of the black antislavery movement," while Timothy Patrick McCarthy analyzes the sprawling "culture of dissent" that abolitionists developed through "an extensive and sophisticated network of print media" – a network that circulated Garnet's speeches. See Patrick Rael, *Black Identity and Protest in the Antebellum North* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2001), 70; Timothy

characterized the American system of government as inherently proslavery and that privileged moral suasion as the only legitimate abolitionist tactic, Garnet displayed a willingness to embrace a more flexible brand of reform.⁴⁷ He recognized the contingency of the southern slaveholding ascendance, and, unlike Adams, he accentuated the potential of the institution of government to destroy the institution of slavery. Yet Garnet proved unable to develop a sectional program to destabilize proslavery rule. He expanded upon Adams's political vision by imagining an antislavery coalition, but he could not develop a platform that linked northern servitude and black slavery. Garnet ultimately defended insurrection as a final recourse for escaping an enslaved America, a recourse for black bondsmen that transcended white institutional channels. Nonetheless, he continued to advocate for northern political action, and his efforts to disseminate these mutually exclusive yet potentially transformative tactics ensured that they entered the intellectual framework for future abolitionist activity.

By the late 1830s an increasing number of Garrisonian abolitionists had grown tired of Garrisonian tactics. William Lloyd Garrison had organized local abolitionist societies into the American Anti-Slavery Society in 1833, and for the next several years this national umbrella group served as a home for individuals expressing antislavery sentiments. But the Panic of 1837 and the ensuing social and economic unrest aggravated tensions that were already festering within the organization. Many abolitionists, including those who had begun to send antislavery petitions to Congress, had long harbored doubts about Garrison's reliance upon apolitical moral

Patrick McCarthy, "A Culture of Dissent: American Abolitionism and the Ordeal of Equality" (Ph.D. dissertation, Columbia University, 2006), 4-5.

⁴⁷ For more on Garrison's abolitionist perspective, see Henry Mayer, *All on Fire: William Lloyd Garrison and the Abolition of Slavery* (New York: St. Martin's Press, 1998), 313-15, 328; Elizabeth R. Varon, *Disunion! The Coming of the American Civil War, 1789-1859* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2008), 152-4; John Demos, "The Antislavery Movement and the Problem of Violent 'Means,'" *New England Quarterly* 37 no. 4 (December, 1964): 501-526.

suasion, and the social upheaval that coincided with economic recession convinced these abolitionists that more forceful measures were needed to propel the abolitionist cause. Their doubts sparked dissension at the seventh annual meeting of the American Society.⁴⁸

Garnet counted himself among the dissidents. He attended the Society's meeting and delivered an address to defend a resolution claiming that "all the rights and immunities of American citizens are justly due to the people of color," but his speech also began to illuminate his antislavery interpretation of "the foundations of our republican institutions." Garnet argued that slavery was not a sectional problem but a "national disgrace," and he declared that "the shrill sound of the plantation horn" echoed "even among our northern hills." Yet Garnet, unlike the Garrisonians, attempted to sever the premise that proslavery views pervaded ostensibly non-slaveholding states from the conclusion that slavery was constitutive of the American polity. Beginning with the claim that "the government was formed on the most solid materials," he elaborated that the "spirit of the pilgrims" had intended to construct "an edifice within whose walls the most extensive liberty should abide" and that the revolutionaries of 1776 had hearkened back to this foundational "breath of liberty" when they drafted the Declaration of Independence. Slavery's status as an American institution did not derive from the ideological origins of the United States; instead, the problem stemmed from the lived process through which slavery had been instantiated within the United States. It was the "base conduct" of citizens in the early republic, the "endeavoring" of slaveholding politicians, the "concern" of southern agricultural interests that had remade in practice the power of proslavery ideology. Garnet's analysis suggested that slavery was not a self-evident corollary to the American Constitution, and this

⁴⁸ John Stauffer, *The Black Hearts of Men: Radical Abolitionists and the Transformation of Race* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2002), 115-17; Richard J. Sewell, *Ballots for Freedom: Antislavery Politics in the United States, 1837-1860* (New York: W. W. Norton & Company, 1980), 24-28.

perspective implied that government could perhaps serve as a tool, instead of an impediment, for future abolitionist efforts.⁴⁹

A few days after Garnet gave his address, the seventh annual convention of the American Anti-Slavery Society ended with many of the participants leaving Garrison's organization to form another one. The resultant American and Foreign Anti-Slavery Society embraced several positions that Garrison regarded as anathema – a dispute over the formal admittance of women into the abolitionist ranks had sparked the secession – but most significant among these were the embrace of the Constitution as an antislavery document and the presentation of the political realm as a viable forum for antislavery efforts. Members of the new society soon gathered to found an antislavery political party, and in April 1840, the Liberty Party was officially organized.⁵⁰

African Americans constituted some of the party's earliest affiliates. The ever-growing frequency of mob violence directed against abolitionists in general and black abolitionists in particular had made them all the more cognizant of the need to, as an editorialist for *The Colored American* put it, ensure that "work at moral abolition" would "charge home" through political abolition.⁵¹ Garnet claimed to have been the first "colored man that ever attached his name to that party," and at the 1842 convention of the Massachusetts Liberty Party, he tried to expand upon his 1840 implication that government could serve as a tool for abolition. He made a speech

⁴⁹ *The Colored American*, 30 May 1840; Schor, *Henry Highland Garnet*, 50. Garnet was indeed a dissident by 1840, but Benjamin Quarles notes that in 1834 Garnet led the members of New York's Garrison Literary and Benevolent Society in shouts of "Garrison! Garrison! Garrison! Forever." See Benjamin Quarles, *Black Abolitionists* (New York: Da Capo Press, 1991 [1969]), 105.

⁵⁰ Mayer, *All on Fire*, 263-83; Sewell, *Ballots for Freedom*, 52-75.

⁵¹ *The Colored American*, 16 November 1839; David Grimstead, *American Mobbing, 1828-1861: Toward Civil War* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1998), 35-7; James Oliver Horton and Lois E. Horton, *In Hope of Liberty: Culture, Community and Protest among Northern Free Blacks, 1700-1860* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1998), 238-240; Leon F. Litwack, *North of Slavery: The Negro in the Free States, 1790-1860* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1961), 239-40.

at the convention in which he again accentuated the national character of slavery by noting that “the apathy of the North” hindered the termination of the “accursed system of slavery,” but this time he employed the language of sectional servitude to explain the root cause of northern apathy. The “Dark Spirit of Slavery,” Garnet asserted, hovered “over the whole Union,” casting “her huge shadow over the whole domain.” And it was through the political apparatus that proslavery dominance was constantly renewed. The only candidates for elective office were “color-haters,” because only those candidates who upheld the proslavery ideology received the backing of “the old pro-slavery parties.” Politics promoted the proslavery status quo, then, by promoting similarity: the candidates that “the time-worn, weather-beaten soldiers of abolition” could potentially back were not abolitionist in the least, which meant that a vote cast by an abolitionist was a vote that exacerbated northern consent to southern supremacy.⁵²

As a means to overcome this auto-affirming impediment, Garnet articulated the potential for an antislavery, third-party coalition, a possibility he had only gestured toward in his 1840 speech. He suggested that if abolitionists could carry “our principles out at the polls,” they would no longer need to choose between the candidates of the two major parties whose occasional professions of abolitionism were nothing more than vote-grabbing misdirections. Abolitionists needed to make a greater number of citizens “feel for slaves as ‘bound with them’” to accomplish this end; they needed to prove to white northerners that they were “*free* and *enslaved* with [black bondsmen],” in order to augment the energy of the Liberty Party at the ballot box. Political action could counteract the capacity of the ruling southern elites to buttress their supremacy through political means, provided that abolitionists utilized the “ample resources

⁵² *The Colored American*, 4 March 1842. Although Quarles does not substantiate Garnet’s claim that he was the first African-American to join the Liberty Party, Quarles does assert that “the most ardent of the early Liberty Party men” was indeed Garnet. See Quarles, *Black Abolitionists*, 184.

of their own minds made strong by *exertion* and rich by *experience*.”⁵³ They needed to tie their abolitionism to the ground to make it come alive for northern voters.

Garnet believed that these voters would only support emancipation for slaves in the South after they realized that emancipation for slaves meant political emancipation for them, too. Yet he had not developed an argument that would convince white northerners that their own political submission was tied to the institution of black slavery. He could imagine a sectional antislavery party, but he could not formulate a platform that resonated with a majority of northern voters. Perhaps recognizing the limits of his political imagination, Garnet presented in his speech an alternative, less institutionalist possibility: violent revolt. Recalling his own time as a slave, he asked himself what he would do if he were still being “trampled under foot by these traders in the souls of men,” and he answered that “all that man dares to do, I would do.” That line – and the vast majority of his speech – drew enthusiastic cheers from his majority white audience, but his next line did not. For Garnet related the story of the “heaving fires that formerly burst forth like the lava of a burning volcano” when “the slave rose and asserted *his rights to humanity and liberty*.” All that man dared do, apparently, included slave insurrection, a possibility that almost no American dared countenance.⁵⁴

Although Garnet depicted insurrection as an alternative to political action, he portrayed it more as an option to be averted, not as a tactic to be embraced. Following the argument David Walker advanced in his *Appeal to the Colored Citizens of the World* over a decade prior, Garnet used the apocalyptic image of “heaving fires” – images that had been driven home in the public

⁵³ Ibid; Schor, *Henry Highland Garnet*, 50.

⁵⁴ Ibid. Black abolitionists were growing more militant by the late 1830s and early 1840s, but the majority of African Americans were relatively reluctant to embrace outright resistance among slaves as a viable means to achieve emancipation. See Howard H. Bell, “Expressions of Negro Militancy in the North, 1840-1860,” *Journal of Negro History* 45 no. 1 (January, 1960): 11-20; David Brion Davis, *Inhuman Bondage: The Rise and Fall of Slavery in the New World* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2006), 266.

imagination by Nat Turner's Southampton revolt in 1831 – as a lever to generate support among the apathetic voters and moral suasionists of the North for the more peaceful method of political abolition. Indeed, he stressed that slave revolts were “kept in check, only by the abolitionists.” Slaves knew of the work that abolitionists were undertaking on their behalf, and their knowledge kept them from being “driven to desperation” and carrying out God's retribution for the sin of slavery. Garnet thus employed the specter of insurrection to lend credence to the tactic of political action. His speech suggested that if grassroots politicking by Liberty Party activists could not convince white northerners to embrace emancipation “ESTABLISHED BY LAW,” then the possibility of emancipation achieved through extralegal violence would.⁵⁵

By 1843 Garnet's work to disseminate antislavery possibilities had established him as one of America's foremost black abolitionists, and he used his national stature to help organize the Black National Convention in Buffalo. Since its 1831 inception in Philadelphia, national conventions had been formed to bring African Americans from diverse communities together to deliberate upon their shared challenges and the prospects for overcoming them. Looking back

⁵⁵ *The Colored American*, 4 March 1842. Garnet had read and been influenced by Walker. In 1848 he published an edition of Walker's *Appeal* that included his own “Address to the Slaves of the United States,” an address we shall discuss shortly. See Scot French, *The Rebellious Slave: Nat Turner in American Memory* (New York: Houghton Mifflin, 2004), 79; Schor, *Henry Highland Garnet*, 51-4. Robert H. Abzug discusses the extent to which apprehension of slave violence contributed to the development of Garrison's abolitionist ideology in Robert H. Abzug, “The Influence of Garrisonian Abolitionists' Fears of Slave Violence on the Antislavery Argument, 1829-1840,” *Journal of Negro History* 55, no. 1 (January, 1970): 15-26. Eddie S. Glaude, Jr., states that “Walker explicitly called for armed black resistance against the sinful institution of slavery,” but I seek to emphasize the ambiguity of Walker's call. For on the one hand, Walker decried what he perceived as black servility, writing, “humanity, kindness, and the fear of the Lord, does not consist in protecting devils.” He also hoped for a second coming of Hannibal, characterized Haiti as “the glory of blacks and the terror of tyrants,” and proclaimed, most strikingly, that “it is no more harm for you to kill a man, who is trying to kill you, than it is for you to take a drink of water when thirsty.” On the other hand, however, Walker suggested that “the destruction of the oppressors God may not effect by the oppressed,” and bemoaned that “some of the advocates of this cunningly devised plot of Satan [i.e., advocates of the American Colonization Society] represent us to be the greatest cutthroats in the world, as though God wants us to take his work out of his hand before he is ready.” In sum, then, I would argue that Walker, like Garnet in his 1842 speech, presented insurrection as a threat, not as a promise. See Eddie S. Glaude, Jr., *Exodus! Religion, Race and Nation in Early Nineteenth-Century Black America* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2000), 34; David Walker, *An Appeal to the Colored Citizens of the World* (Baltimore: Black Classic Press, 1993 [1830]), 45, 40, 23, 46, 88.

on the meetings in 1859, an editorialist for the *Anglo-African Magazine* noted that they were especially significant for promoting the “independence and self-assertion of the black man,” because they had provided a forum in which blacks could debate the contours of American abolitionism away from the influence of white abolitionist power brokers. In 1843, however, such a forum had been lacking for nearly a decade. The last convention, hosted in Philadelphia in 1835, had ended with representatives from Philadelphia and New York agreeing to go their separate ways, and it took considerable wrangling from Garnet – who had been too young to participate in the previous conventions – and his fellow New Yorkers to convince the various factions of black abolitionists, particularly those from Massachusetts who were loyal to Garrison, to participate in a new convention.⁵⁶

Whereas the previous national convention had privileged reliance upon God and had focused on debates over emigration, the opening speech in 1843 by Chairmen *pro tem* Samuel H. Davis reflected the secular and political themes that Garnet had been sounding in recent years.⁵⁷ Like Garnet, Davis acknowledged the need for a flexible brand of abolitionism. He argued that African Americans had “to seek our own liberty and the liberty of our brethren in bonds, by every means in our power,” and he suggested that proslavery ideology had so utterly permeated American culture that the traditional tools black abolitionists had championed to overcome

⁵⁶ “The First Colored Convention,” *Anglo-American Magazine* 1, no. 10 (October, 1859); Glaude, *Exodus!*, 143; Schor, *Henry Highland Garnet*, 49; Litwack, *North of Slavery*, 235-6. Garrisonian-leaning African Americans defended their decision to attend the Buffalo convention on the basis that such a convention could provide “a medium through which we may deliberately devise ways and means to operate and co-operate with our friends, against TWO of the greatest evils ever inflicted...slavery and prejudice.” See *The Liberator*, 4 August 1843.

⁵⁷ “Minutes of the Fifth Annual Convention for the Improvement of the Free Persons of Color in the United States: Held by Adjournments in the Wesley Church, Philadelphia, from the First to the Fifth of June, Inclusive, 1835 (Philadelphia: William P. Gibbons, 1835), 22-4, reprinted in Howard H. Bell, *Proceedings of the National Negro Conventions, 1830-1864* (New York: Arno Press, 1969); Manisha Sinha, “An Alternative Tradition of Radicalism: African American Abolitionists and the Metaphor of Revolution,” in *Contested Democracy: Freedom, Race, and Power in American History*, eds. Manisha Sinha and Penny Von Eschen, (New York: Columbia University Press, 2007), 18; Howard H. Bell, “National Negro Conventions of the Middle 1840’s: Moral Suasion vs. Political Action,” *Journal of Negro History* 42, no. 4 (October, 1957): 247-260.

discrimination in the North and slavery in the South – petitioning and racial uplift – were inadequate to the present task.⁵⁸ Nor would conventional political activity be adequate, because the “great political parties of the day” were “but the slaves of slavery, too, contending which shall be most faithful in supporting the foul system of slavery.” Blacks could not even wait for the efforts of white abolitionists to prove fruitful, as Davis stated that “if we sit down in idleness and sloth, waiting for them...to do our own work, I fear it will never get done.” African Americans needed instead to articulate their own tactics, which would allow them to assert their “rightful claims” and plead their own cause. It would be the job of the delegates to decide which tactics to espouse.⁵⁹

Davis’s speech facilitated an often heated debate regarding the viability and the integrity of numerous antislavery possibilities. The convention largely divided into two camps: delegates from Massachusetts, led by a twenty-five-year-old runaway slave named Frederick Douglass, defended Garrison’s apolitical ideology; delegates from New York, who lined up behind the twenty-eight-year-old Garnet, upheld more activist options. The contest between the two groups began as soon as a resolution was introduced that stipulated that “it is the duty of every lover of liberty to vote the Liberty ticket as long as they are consistent to their *principles*.” Douglass would have none of this. He had repeatedly denounced political action, proclaiming during one of his first public appearances in 1841 that slaveholders “care nothing about your political

⁵⁸ Glaude places considerable emphasis on the extent to which the national convention movement embraced a “politics of respectability,” which “assumed a bourgeois aspiration for middle-class respectability” and “argued that through education, moral living, and economic self-sufficiency an aspiring black middle class, and thus blacks in general, would improve in ‘rank and standing among men.’” The published minutes corroborate his contention that debates over racial uplift figured prominently in the conventions, but my focus is on the state-oriented possibilities that Garnet disseminated, and I therefore privilege those debates in the conventions. Glaude, *Exodus!*, 114, 151-2.

⁵⁹ “Minutes of the National Convention of Colored Citizens: Held at Buffalo, on the 15th, 16th, 17th, 18th and 19th of August, 1843. For the Purpose of Considering their Moral and Political Condition as American Citizens” (New York: Piercy and Reed, 1843) 4-7, reprinted in Howard H. Bell, *Proceedings of the National Negro Conventions, 1830-1864* (New York: Arno Press, 1969).

action” because they understood that the Union “constitutes the bulwark of slavery.” That the abolitionist movement had to be a “moral movement” that appealed to “men’s sense of right” was his conclusion then, and he rose at the 1843 convention to make the same point.⁶⁰ He led the Garrisonians in arguing that all political parties were “verily and necessarily corrupt,” and he refused to exempt the Liberty Party from this characterization. Defending the view that the American system of government was necessarily proslavery, Douglass concluded that any political activity that operated within such a system – even if the operators were earnestly antislavery – would be doomed to failure.⁶¹

Garnet led the charge in suggesting that the Liberty Party presented a possibility that might help to promote the cause of emancipation. The party might not succeed, but Garnet and his followers, “believing most heartily in the principles of the party, in its measures and in its object,” saw no reason to dismiss the party – and political action – out of hand. Underlying these arguments was Garnet’s fundamental belief that proslavery supremacy did not embody an irrevocable inherence but persisted only as a lived and contextual process of domination. The Whigs and the Democrats followed the proslavery line, but their acquiescence to a southern agenda did not mean that an antislavery third party with a sufficiently wide electoral net could not challenge the supremacy of southern elites (and their northern slaves). Garnet’s position ultimately won out, and the contested resolution was adopted. Tacitly embraced through its adoption was Garnet’s perspective of government, a perspective that was encapsulated in a later resolution that was adopted without debate:

⁶⁰ *The Liberator*, 26 November 1841. For more on Douglass’s (evolving) position on militant and political resistance, see Leslie Friedman Goldstein, “Violence as an Instrument for Social Change: The Views of Frederick Douglass,” *Journal of Negro History* 61, no. 1. (January, 1976): 61-72.

⁶¹ “Minutes of the National Convention of Colored Citizens: Held at Buffalo,” 15-16, reprinted in Bell, *Proceedings*.

Resolved, that we believe that it is possible for human governments to be righteous as it is for human beings to be righteous, and that God-fearing men can make the government of our country well pleasing in his right, and that slavery can be abolished by its instrumentality.

For Garnet, unlike Douglass, that was the crux of the matter: the American union might well be a proslavery union, but it did not have to be any more than northern citizens had to submit to proslavery rule.⁶² What mattered was not the nature of the United States government in the abstract, but the operation of the United States government in context. And context was contingent.⁶³

These disputes concerning political action were ultimately subordinated to a still more heated debate over Garnet's decision to emphasize – instead of only threatening, as he had a year before – the possibility of insurrectionary slave resistance. Garnet opened his “Address to the Slaves of the United States of America” on the second day of the convention by stressing the “ties” that connected all black Americans independent of place. He then shifted to deliver the crux of his speech, which, as the historian Eddie S. Glaude has noted, upended the traditional religious arguments that abolitionists used against slavery. Rather than suggesting that Christian benevolence required slaveholders to manumit their slaves or that Christian forbearance required slaves to await their freedom passively, Garnet announced that Christian duty required slaves to resist their oppressors. “TO SUCH DEGRADATION IT IS SINFUL IN THE EXTREME FOR YOU TO MAKE SUBMISSION,” he vehemently asserted, because “your condition does not absolve you from your moral obligation.” Slaves still needed to love their neighbors as themselves; slaves still needed to keep the Sabbath holy; slaves still needed to teach their

⁶² Garrisonians had at least granted that American citizens could change their minds about slavery: the doctrine of moral suasion was premised upon such an assumption.

⁶³ “Minutes of the National Convention of Colored Citizens: Held at Buffalo,” 15-16, 21-22, reprinted in Bell, *Proceedings*.

children the precepts of the Bible – but they required freedom to do so.⁶⁴ Garnet therefore implored slaves to “use every means, moral, intellectual, and physical, that promise success” to achieve liberation, and he cautioned that slaves would likely have to resort to the third and most extreme of these options. There was limited hope in this generation for black emancipation without bloodshed, because slavery had “stretched its dark wings of death over the land...and the people loved to have it so.” Its “throne” was “established,” and “now it reigns triumphantly.” Concluding that it would be better to “*die freemen, than to live to be slaves*,” and celebrating the “tremendous” Denmark Vesey, the “patriotic” Nat Turner, and the “immortal” Joseph Cinque, Garnet advised slaves to “let [their] motto be RESISTANCE! RESISTANCE! RESISTANCE!” To ensure their freedom, in other words, slaves needed to follow their insurrectionary archetypes and strike the blow against slavery on their own.⁶⁵

It was revolutionary for a nineteenth-century African American to discuss killing a white man in any situation – even to a northern and primarily black audience – and the response from his listeners was immediate. The address was referred to a select committee on account of “some points in it that might...appear objectionable,” and Douglass again moved to challenge Garnet, protesting that “there was too much physical force” in the address and adding that if it ever reached the slaves the result would be an “insurrection for liberty.” Douglass wanted no part in bringing about such a catastrophe, and he urged “trying the moral means a little longer,” because “he wanted emancipation in a better way, as he expected to have it.” Such debate continued over the next several days, as Garnet proceeded to offer a lengthy and impromptu defense of his Address. So eloquent was his second rhetorical effort, an effort in which he

⁶⁴ Glaude, *Exodus!*, 148, 152.

⁶⁵ Henry Highland Garnet, “Address to the Slaves of the United States of America,” in *The Black Abolitionist Papers: The United States, 1830-1846*, vol. 3, ed. C. Peter Ripley (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1991), 403-11.

declared that it was time to “speak louder and longer – to take higher ground and other steps” to end such an “abominable system,” that he reduced his audience to tears. But in the end, Garnet proved unable to convince a majority of the delegates to adopt his speech as the official position of the convention. The crucial vote came on Friday, August 18. He lost by single vote.⁶⁶

Although Garnet had articulated a radical possibility, the ensuing controversy his address provoked has obscured the subtlety of his articulation. Garnet had enjoined slaves to use any possible means to free themselves – but only so long as those means “promised success.” Elaborating upon this caveat, Garnet twice discussed the viability of a massive and violent revolt, and twice he stressed the inadvisability of such a tactic: “We do not advise you to attempt a revolution with the sword,” he asserted midway through his speech, because “it would be INEXPEDIENT.” The number of slaves was too small, and “the rising spirit of the age” was opposed to bloodshed. He ended his speech with a similar word of caution, telling slaves that “what kind of resistance you had better make, you must decide by the circumstances that surround you, and according to the suggestion of expediency.” Garnet called for slave resistance, but he only implied the extent of the violence such resistance would entail.⁶⁷

Garnet’s repeated emphasis on the “expedience” of insurrection accentuates that he embraced radical possibilities for pragmatic reasons. Garnet supported whatever worked to further emancipation, and he stressed the utility of a multifaceted abolitionist approach above all

⁶⁶ “Minutes of the National Convention of Colored Citizens: Held at Buffalo,” 12-13, 18-19, reprinted in Bell, *Proceedings*.

⁶⁷ Garnet, “Address to the Slaves of the United States of America,” in *The Black Abolitionist Papers*, 403-11. Although several historians have disputed whether Garnet termed violent insurrection “inexpedient” in the 1843 version of his Address (versus the subsequently published 1848 version), I agree with Stanley Harrold’s argument that the preponderance of the evidence suggests, “the passage rejecting slave revolt had been in the Address as Garnet originally presented it in 1843.” See Stanley Harrold, *The Rise of Aggressive Abolitionism: Addresses to the Slaves* (Lexington: University of Kentucky Press, 2004), 33-5. For the opposing perspective, see Jane H. Pease and William H. Pease, *They Who Would Be Free: Blacks’ Search for Freedom, 1830-1861* (New York: Atheneum, 1974), 239.

else.⁶⁸ At the Buffalo convention he had already defended political action, and his subsequent espousal of slave resistance did not reflect a dismissal of the political possibility but merely his recognition that he had as yet been unable to convince white northerners to join the Liberty Party. Garnet understood that, if anything, slavery had only become more entrenched within institutional channels since 1840, as the Gag Rule continued to win support in Congress and the Supreme Court had ruled in *Prigg v. Pennsylvania* (1842) that slaveholders possessed a constitutional right to recapture fugitive slaves.⁶⁹ He consequently advanced a militant possibility as just that: a possibility. Garnet believed that slave resistance could succeed in challenging proslavery domination, but he never suggested that only slave resistance would succeed. He simply appreciated the possibility's potential.⁷⁰

Over the next several years Garnet continued to uphold both of the possibilities that he had helped to articulate. In October 1847, he attended the next black national convention, where he reiterated his espousal of political action and repeated his "Address to the Slaves." But by

⁶⁸ Glaude points to Garnet's "eagerness to force the End," but I read his "Address to the Slaves" to suggest that although Garnet was eager to end slavery, he was not eager to end slavery through violent insurrection. See Glaude, *Exodus!*, 154-5, 157. Even the degree of militancy Garnet advocated was ambiguous. He referenced America's foremost black insurrectionists and hinted at the need for insurrection, but he merely instructed slaves to "go to your lordly enslavers, and...entreat them to remove the grievous burdens which they have imposed upon you," and he referenced the relatively bloodless revolts that had spurred emancipation in the West Indies (during the Barbadian revolt, for example, white casualties had reached a grand total of one). Insofar as he gestured toward the West Indian revolts, moreover, Garnet's analysis complicates Manisha Sinha's argument that "Revolution to black abolitionists meant not just the incomplete legacy of the American Revolution but also the Haitian revolution." Indeed, unlike Sinha, who states that the Haitian revolution was "the only instance of a successful slave rebellion in world history," Garnet acknowledged that slave resistance on a large scale did not need to be bloody in order to be revolutionary. Sinha, "An Alternative Tradition of Radicalism," 10, 21.

⁶⁹ Schor, *Henry Highland Garnet*, 53-4.

⁷⁰ Some might suggest that Garnet's advocacy for slave resistance in 1843 was more genuine than his advocacy for political action in 1842, because he advocated for the former position in front of a primarily black audience. Yet this argument ignores the fact that Garnet advocated for political action not merely in front of white audiences but at the black national convention, too. And just as it would be a mistake to claim that Garnet's advocacy of political action was a veneer, so too would it be a mistake to claim that Garnet's "Address to the Slaves" was intended only for rhetorical effect. For if he intended his speech as a ploy, or if he never intended for slaves to read his speech, then why would he have worked so hard to have the convention adopt – and by adopting, publish – his position?

then his influence even among black abolitionists had ebbed, as Douglass, aided by the release of *The North Star*, had positioned himself to lead black America's antislavery forces. Discouraged but not deterred, Garnet would travel to England in 1850 for an abolitionist speaking tour, perhaps in an attempt to escape Douglass' ever-growing shadow.⁷¹ Yet two years before his departure, in February 1848, Garnet delivered a lengthy speech in which he explored the "past and present condition" of the "Colored Race" in order to ascertain its "destiny." Discussing the abolitionist movement during the course of his remarks, he avowed that "'the peculiar institution' is doomed." Abolitionists hailing from the Rochester area, a locale he termed "the young lion of the West" in honor of the increasing militancy of its antislavery citizenry, had begun to tear "the net of voluntary servitude" from the rest of the northern population. These abolitionists had promulgated Garnet's doctrine that "in order to be free themselves, they must emancipate the bondsmen," and the time was now right to seize upon abolitionist possibilities and challenge slaveholding supremacy. Garnet had no idea that an older lion, also hailing from the West, had already begun the assault.⁷²

⁷¹ Joel Schor, "The Rivalry Between Frederick Douglass and Henry Highland Garnet," *Journal of Negro History* 64, no. 1 (Winter, 1979): 30-38.

⁷² Henry Highland Garnet, "The Past and the Present Condition, and the Destiny, of the Colored Race: A Discourse," reprinted in Ofari, *Let Your Motto Be Resistance*, 160-183.

CHAPTER 3:

Jabez Delano Hammond and the Performance of Antislavery Blackface

Bringing his slave narrative to a bellicose and bloodthirsty conclusion, the emancipated bondsmen Julius Melbourn proclaims that “the rich rice and cotton fields of the south will be drenched with human gore...the quiet retreats of the domestic circle will be stained with blood...and the gorgeous palaces which now adorn the southern plantations will be enveloped in flames.” That a former slave would even gesture toward such a violent prediction defied generic convention, yet the rebellious climax of the *Life and Opinions of Julius Melbourn* (1847) indicated but the beginning of the account’s unconventionality. For Melbourn’s slave narrative constituted in actuality a work of white fiction, and Melbourn’s espousal of black violence embodied in truth a white author’s desire for freedom.⁷³

The white author was a retired judge, nearing his seventieth birthday, named Jabez Delano Hammond. Though he resided in out-of-the-way Cherry Valley, New York, Hammond nevertheless grasped the full extent of the politics of sectional servitude. Hammond believed that northern submission to southern domination transcended the forum of national politics. Not only northern politicians hoping for partisan advancement but also northern business elites, common laborers, educators, and clergy had professed allegiance, implicitly or explicitly, to proslavery ideology. At the same time he articulated the extent to which northerners were enabling their own bondage, Hammond formulated the platform for abolitionist politics that Henry Highland Garnet had attempted but failed to construct. Imagining an expansive antislavery coalition founded upon a Jeffersonian faith in the common man and an economic

⁷³ Jabez Delano Hammond; Julius Melbourn, *Life and Opinions of Julius Melbourn* (Syracuse: Hall and Dickson, 1847), 238.

critique of proslavery ideology, he believed that northerners could challenge and ultimately supplant the supremacy of southern elites through a broad show of political force.

Yet Hammond, as an elderly white man living in rural New York, lacked both a natural model for conceiving of his political program and a means for transmitting his model to others. In 1847, he seized upon the possibilities of political action and slave rebellion that Garnet had worked to advance, along with the genre of the slave narrative that African Americans had endeavored to disseminate, to promulgate his vision for northern emancipation. Under the guise of "Julius Melbourn," he escaped the constraints of his white identity and appropriated the violent undercurrents of slave discontent in order to frame his answer to northern subservience as a political manifestation of insurrection.

Hammond's appropriation of blackness for white ends was nothing new among antebellum northerners, as members of the white working class had for several decades used blackface minstrelsy to critique northern industrial society and to promote racist stereotypes.⁷⁴ The originality of Hammond's technique thus derived from his ability to use blackface to interpret sectional relations between North and South and from his recognition that northern freedom could only be recovered by emphasizing the insights of southern slaves.⁷⁵ Hammond conceived that whites in the North and blacks on plantations were oppressed by the same degenerate masters, and he discerned that the possibility of black revolt spoke to the North's

⁷⁴ Eric Lott, *Love and Theft: Blackface Minstrelsy and the American Working Class* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1993), 8, 199, 207; David R. Roediger, *The Wages of Whiteness: Race and the Making of the American Working Class* (New York: Verso, 1999), 118, 123.

⁷⁵ Grace Elizabeth Hale discusses several examples of "literary blackface" in postwar southern fiction in *Making Whiteness: The Culture of Segregation in the South, 1890-1940* (New York: Vintage Books, 1998), 47. Quoting Maria Weston Chapman's statement that Garrisonians "dread the tendency to ballots" and abolitionist politics because the coercion that was coextensive with majority rule was "but one remove from bloodshed" and the use of physical coercion, Merton L. Dillon posits that white abolitionists were more likely to support slave insurrection if they supported the use of political power. But I will argue that the relationship between politics and insurrection worked both ways, as Hammond's appropriation of black insurrection allowed him to conceptualize the viability of white political action. See Merton L. Dillon, *Slavery Attacked: Southern Slaves and Their Allies, 1619-1865* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1990), 204.

need for sectional liberation. Writing as Melbourn, he offered a solution to northern oppression that consciously crossed the color line.

With the *Life and Opinions of Julius Melbourn*, Hammond authored a work that violently destabilized the generic conventions of the slave narrative. Slave autobiographies had become an increasingly popular form of literature in the 1840s, and white publishers responded to market demands by urging black writers to conform to the expectations of their white bourgeois readership.⁷⁶ The majority of slave narratives consequently presented idealized slaves that conformed to Victorian sensibilities instead of people brutalized by slave society, and they privileged a slave's triumphant escape from slavery over a slave's daily struggles with white supremacy and white violence.⁷⁷ Hammond's account subverted this formula. His work emphasized the inhumanity of slavery, and he portrayed Melbourn as an African American exceptional for his willingness to express his hatred of southern slavery and northern racism, as well as for his superb intellect and vast wealth. He devoted three-fourths of his narrative to Melbourn's life after slavery, and he presented Melbourn's "remarks and reflections" upon contemporary political affairs and upon his encounters with American luminaries such as Thomas Jefferson, John Marshall, James Madison, and Benjamin Lundy. The result was a text

⁷⁶ Speaking to the increasing popularity of slave narratives during 1840s, the literary scholar William L. Andrews notes that "this was a decade in which both educational preparation and ideological justification for black autobiography existed on a scale sufficient for the needs of a minority genre trying to make a place for itself in the literary mainstream," while another literary scholar, Augusta Rohrbach, argues that slave narratives became so popular in antebellum America that they reflected not simply "an emerging literary tradition" but actually "changed the course of literary history in the United States." See William L. Andrews, *To Tell a Free Story: The First Century of Afro-American Autobiography, 1760-1865* (Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 1986), 99; Augusta Rohrbach, *Truth Stranger than Fiction: Race, Realism, and the U.S. Literary Marketplace* (New York: Palgrave, 2002), 30, 50. Michael McKeon discusses the "destabilization of generic categories" in *The Origins of the English Novel, 1600-1740* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2002), 20, 25, 87, 269.

⁷⁷ Walter Johnson, *Soul by Soul: Life Inside the Antebellum Slave Market* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1999), 10; Andrews, *To Tell a Free Story*, 46, 100, 112, 117, 128.

so sprawling that Hammond himself characterized it as “desultory,” and the work’s seeming incoherence has defied scholarly analysis.⁷⁸

But beneath the sprawl of his disorganized narrative, Hammond’s first objective in *Julius Melbourn* was to elucidate the extent of northern submission to proslavery southern rule. Toward this end he created the semi-autobiographical character of Tobias Thornton to serve as a mouthpiece for his analysis of southern domination. Borrowing from the details of his own life, Hammond had Melbourn introduce Thornton as the son of a poor Vermont farmer who used the education he received in a local common school, along with the knowledge he culled from “the writings of every author which fell in his way,” to secure a job as a teacher, and, later, to win a position in the office of a New York attorney. After noting that Thornton managed by desperate perseverance to obtain a license to practice law, Melbourn adds that Thornton engages the intellect he has honed as a lawyer to interpret the information “that was lumbered up in his mind, like that heterogeneous mass of matter which...a monomaniac might collect and store away in his garret.” Thornton spends his time “sorting, classifying, arranging, and purifying the confused mass of ideas” that he imbibed through his unsystematic education. He strives to use the sum of his discombobulated insights to censure or applaud “with freedom and independence such public men and measures as...challenge his approbation or merit his denunciation.” Creating this

⁷⁸ Hammond, *Life and Opinions of Julius Melbourn*, 4. Several other whites authored fictitious slave narratives during the antebellum era, but Hammond’s anonymous account has caused the greatest amount of trouble for the few scholars who have attempted to interpret it. John Hope Franklin believed that Melbourn was a real person, declaring that “the life of Julius Melbourn is about as interesting as one can find,” while Merrill D. Peterson used the story of Melbourn dining at Monticello to show that “Jefferson could be regarded as the Apostle of Liberty by Negroes struggling for their rights.” Peterson also notes in a footnote that “when southern congressmen assailed President [Theodore] Roosevelt for inviting Booker T. Washington...to the White House, Representative [Richard] Bartholdt, of Missouri, informed his colleagues of Jefferson’s hospitality to Melbourn.” Interestingly, Franklin and Peterson were writing after Vernon Loggins used county records to prove that Melbourn was a fictitious invention. See John Hope Franklin, *The Free Negro in North Carolina, 1790-1860* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1995 [1943]), 157, 183; Merrill D. Peterson, *The Jefferson Image in the American Mind* (Charlottesville: University Press of Virginia Press, 1998 [1960]), 176-177; Elizabeth Davis Reed Murray, “Melbourn, Julius,” *Dictionary of North Carolina Biography*, vol. 4, ed. William S. Powell (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1991), 249.

character allowed Hammond to interject a “white” viewpoint into an ostensibly “black” text. Thornton enabled Hammond to extricate himself from his assumed “black” voice and so as offer a “white” perspective on northern sectional oppression.⁷⁹

Melbourn comments that he met Thornton during a trip to Baltimore, and he relates the story of a visit they paid to the home of Benjamin Lundy, the abolitionist editor of *The Genius of Universal Emancipation* and, in Melbourn’s view, “one of the most extraordinary men of the age.” Their visit sparks a discussion concerning the prospects for the emancipation of slaves in the South, leading Lundy to announce his plan to promote abolition through “an appeal...to the conscience of the slaveholder himself.” Lundy expresses faith in the power of truth to demonstrate beyond all qualification the injustices and cruelties of slavery, for he avows that slavery is so clearly “an outrage on human rights” and so flagrantly a sin against God that misguided slaveholders cannot possibly ignore his pleas for manumission.⁸⁰

Thornton, however, is not convinced by Lundy’s moralistic prescription, because he perceives that “missionaries in behalf of the slave” will be “laughed at and mobbed by the people of the north, and lynched and murdered by the people of the south.” Lundy is astonished by Thornton’s pessimism, but Thornton continues his argument that moral suasion will fail to bring slavery to an end. He instead claims that every segment of northern society has submitted to

⁷⁹ Hammond, *Life and Opinions of Julius Melbourn*, 120-1, 123, 125. As noted above, the details of Thornton’s biography parallel the details of Hammond’s life. Perhaps to avoid undercutting his authorial anonymity by making the parallel too obvious, Hammond elided his two greatest claims to fame in Melbourn’s description of Thornton: he ignored his political career, during which he won a term in the United States House of Representatives from 1815 to 1817, two terms in the New York State Senate from 1818 to 1821, and five years as an Otsego County Judge from 1838 to 1843, and he passed over his prior literary success as the author of a well-received study entitled *The History of Political Parties in the State of New York*. For additional biographical details see Davis R. Dewey, “Jabez Delano Hammond,” *Dictionary of American Biography*, vol. 4, eds. Allen Johnson and Dumas Malone (New York: Charles Scribner’s Sons, 1960), 205-6; Donald R. Roper, “Hammond, Jabez Delano,” *American National Biography*, vol. 9, eds. John A. Garraty and Mark C. Carnes (New York: Oxford University Press, 1999), 954-955. Merton Dillon suggests that Hammond “fit no pattern fro the malcontented...of any age.” Dillon, *Slavery Attacked*, 205.

⁸⁰ Hammond, *Life and Opinions of Julius Melbourn*, 125, 128-9.

southern domination to such an extent that moral appeals will prove ineffectual to the task of challenging the all-encompassing ideology that underwrites southern rule.⁸¹

Thornton maintains that because of the traditional practice of his ancestors, the contemporary slaveholder takes for granted the labor of his slaves with as little question as “that his grains should be transported by his beasts of burden.” Moreover, the slaveholder has been accustomed by law to conceive of black slaves only as the subjects and property of their white masters. Thornton underscores that “the slave comes to his master...by *bona fide* purchase,” and he concludes that the “pecuniary interest” of slaveholders forms an insurmountable obstacle to manumission: a slaveholder is as likely to sacrifice his property in slaves as a northern farmer is to manumit his horses.⁸²

But the plantation elites are not alone among southerners in their espousal of proslavery dogma. On the contrary, Thornton stresses that the non-slaveholding majority in the South is equally ardent in its support for the institution of slavery. “Public opinion is created...by the opinion of the most intelligent and influential men in the several neighborhoods which compose a given state,” he contends, and the worldview of the South’s “leading men” – those who possess the greatest stake in the preservation of slaveholding society – governs southern orthodoxy. Though slaveholders are numerically in the minority, then, their intellectual leadership ensures that all southerners are united in favor of slavery. They create the rationale for slavery that non-slaveholding southerners adopt as their own.⁸³

Thornton argues that a united South enforces the bondage of black Americans, and he alleges that southern unity impels white northerners to consent to enslavement as well. Like

⁸¹ Ibid., 138.

⁸² Ibid., 131-2.

⁸³ Ibid., 132-3.

John Quincy Adams, he suggests that southerners use “the influence of the national patronage” to co-opt the support of northern politicians. The federal division of authority has allowed proslavery southerners to increase their political power by granting purview to the states in the selection of voters for the Electoral College. Federalism thus affords southerners with the means to channel their unity to ensure that presidential elections result in a slaveholder winning office, and along with the “injustice” of the three-fifths clause, it guarantees that a proslavery president will be able to extend the prospect of executive patronage to divide and neutralize the latent political energies of the North. In Thornton’s conception, through their control of the presidency the slaveholders at the top of the state apparatus induce politicians from non-slaveholding states to toe the proslavery line. By making it known that “the promulgation of an opinion in favor of the liberty of the slave” will effectively “disfranchise” aspiring politicians, southern elites compel northern partisans to sacrifice the moral claims of abolition upon the altar of their political ambitions.⁸⁴

Adams had privileged the extent to which northern politicians enabled proslavery southern rule, but Hammond’s literary stand-in argues that political consent constitutes but one prong of northerners’ subservience. Declaring that there are obstacles beyond the political to Lundy’s scheme for emancipation, he avows that northerners have economic motives to support slavery. Accordingly, “the ship-owner and importing merchant” support slavery because it provides their most profitable commercial exports, while “the northern manufacturer and mechanic” support slavery because it impedes the development of southern factories: “nothing is more certain,” Thornton perceives, “than that manufacturing establishments cannot flourish in a slave state” where manual labor is deemed the exclusive duty of slaves and where whites deem

⁸⁴ Ibid., 134.

wage labor anathema. Slavery thus bolsters “the balance-sheet” for northern commerce and ensures that the finished goods of the South are furnished by the factories of the North. Northern businessmen, recognizing that their profits are generated through the labor of southern slaves, align in favor of the institution that assures their economic welfare.⁸⁵

Thornton adds that the North’s complicity in slavery also employs an ideological rationale that assuages the anxieties of the northern laborer. For proslavery ideology satisfies the psychological desire, present in even the most degraded individual, to claim superiority over some other group of human beings. Although northern industrialization has effectively marginalized a considerable number of white people, the “most ignorant and vulgar white man, according to the laws of the society in which he lives,” can nevertheless “claim a superiority...in consequence of a difference in the color of his skin.” White laborers consequently array themselves against the abolitionist cause, as they desire to preserve this superiority that they can claim “at so cheap a rate.” And by consenting to the domination of southern elites because proslavery rule sustains white supremacy, northern workers align with northern business to further slaveholding supremacy.⁸⁶

Even the institutions of northern secular and spiritual education have begun to espouse proslavery ideology, continues Thornton. Noting that the sons of southern plantation elites receive their education at northern universities, Thornton suggests that every major northern college “depends mainly for its support on the patronage of slaveholders.” Similarly, Christian sects of the North, which are all “anxious to extend their respective creeds,” rely upon “their numbers in the southern states” for denominational growth. Neither northern colleges nor northern churches will dare countenance the abolitionists’ “war upon slavery,” because such a

⁸⁵ Ibid., 135-6.

⁸⁶ Ibid., 134-5.

war would alienate them from the population whose support they are most desirous of cultivating. Co-opted by a desire for southern endorsement, the North's educational institutions buy into the proslavery ideology that southern sponsorship requires.⁸⁷

It was through Thornton that Hammond illustrated the extent of northern submission to proslavery rule, but it was through Melbourn that Hammond announced the dangers of that submission. Writing as an emancipated slave allowed Hammond to appropriate the firsthand knowledge of slaveholding degeneracy that white northerners lacked. Melbourn thus asserts that his first master, known as Major Johnson, proclaimed himself a revolutionary patriot and an ardent lover of liberty while carrying on an illicit trade with the British and, Melbourn implies, partaking in sexual liaisons with his slaves. Worse still was Alexander St. John, the master of Melbourn's wife Maria and a man so "profligate in his principles and habits, and tyrannical and brutal in his character" that after Maria resisted his "improper designs," he simply sold her down the river. The only southern slaveholder who does not represent "a loathsome monument of intemperance, and a lamentable specimen" is Mrs. Melbourn, the exceptionally progressive owner who purchases Julius at the age of five, educates him, and then frees him. But she is not really a southerner at all: she imbibed the religious and political principles that rendered her "zealously opposed to slavery" in her native Britain. From his collective experiences Melbourn allows that the institution of slavery produces and perpetuates "the extreme of wretchedness," a conclusion that lends a slave's authenticity to Hammond's indictment of slaveholding. Thornton argues that northerners have submitted to the rule of the plantation elites, and Melbourn adds that those plantation elites constitute a class of tyrants.⁸⁸

⁸⁷ Ibid., 136-7.

⁸⁸ Ibid., 8, 27-8, 64, 11, 32.

Just as Hammond used Thornton to illustrate the extent to which northern subservience inhibited the prospects for moral suasion, he returned to Thornton to proffer answers to the problem of black bondage that revealed the thinking of a free white northerner. Following his analysis of northern sectional oppression and in response to the question of whether “nothing [is] to be done for the cause of liberty and human rights,” Thornton asserts that slavery’s extirpation must be gradual, because “it cannot, except by carnage and slaughter, be suddenly abolished.” Consequently, he suggests that abolitionists continue to publish antislavery literature in order to “keep the subject before the American people,” and he further suggests that abolitionists refuse to support candidates for Congress or ministers of religion that sustain the proslavery position. Beyond these passing suggestions, though, “the best, and perhaps the only peaceable means of producing universal emancipation” is to elevate “the standard of morals and the character of the free colored people among us.” If African Americans could only “learn and pursue the mechanic arts, agriculture, mercantile and professional business,” then, Thornton maintains, they could “rise to an equal rank with [their] fellow man” and end the South’s oppression of the North. Establishing the credentials of African Americans for citizenship, uplift would reveal to white northerners the fallacy of accepting proslavery ideology, and they would then push for the emancipation of southern slaves.⁸⁹

Yet Hammond chose to expose the inadequacy of Thornton’s prescriptions by reapplying blackface and presenting Melbourn’s perspective on northern society. This application of blackface allowed Hammond to go beyond the gradualist and racist prescriptions for eradicating slaveholding supremacy. Melbourn records in his narrative repeated examples of northern racism – of a “zealous abolitionist” telling him that “it was highly improper for negroes...to

⁸⁹ Ibid., 138-40.

attempt to associate with white people,” of the members of Philadelphia’s high society refusing ‘any social intercourse’ with his “African blood” – and he arrives at the conclusion that “the [northern] prejudice founded upon color” amounts to “a color-*phobia*” so strong that he must move to Britain to escape it. His decision to emigrate from the country is especially damning for the possibility of black uplift, however, because Melbourn represents the quintessentially uplifted black. An African American so well-educated that, in Hammond’s tale, none other than Thomas Jefferson proclaims him “of the first order of human intellects,” he is nevertheless rejected by northern white society. Melbourn’s rejection makes Hammond’s point: black uplift, no less than moral suasion, was inadequate (if not irrelevant) to the task of liberating southern slaves because it elided the prerequisite task of liberating northerners from proslavery southern rule. Such programs privileged the constrained circumstances of African Americans without emphasizing the sectional organization of power that enforced such constraints. They assailed the effects of the politics of sectional servitude without first attacking the causes.⁹⁰

More important than allowing him to disparage the emancipatory prospects for moral suasion and black uplift, Hammond’s use of blackface allowed him to transcend the limits of white possibilities by presenting his solution to the problem of northern subservience through the “authentic” voice of a former slave. Melbourn lays the groundwork for this solution when he offers a critique of the “old federal party,” commenting that the Federalists “felt too little respect and reverence for the mass of the people.” He contends that their contempt for popular opinion was “not only impolitic, but radically wrong,” because in the United States “the PEOPLE are the sovereigns,” and because in the United States, therefore, “the maxim ‘*Vox populi vox Dei*’ should be held strictly applicable.” Though he grants that the American people are capable of

⁹⁰ Ibid., 216, 81, 77.

acting “corruptly,” Melbourn consequently avows that American reformers should predicate their reform movements on the assumption that the people are capable of deciding wisely and only act wrongly when they have been misled by false information. After his visit to Monticello, Melbourn notes with pleasure the criticisms that Jefferson heaped upon those who had “imbibed...a contempt for the masses,” and Melbourn expresses his belief that a Jeffersonian faith in the common man is a prerequisite for progress in America.⁹¹

The reason that the abolitionists had failed to advance a compelling response to proslavery rule in the North, then, was that they had refused to embrace the marginalized masses of working-class northerners. In an argument that has been amplified by later scholars, W.E.B. Du Bois claimed in 1935 that nineteenth-century white laborers, “received a low wage, [but] were compensated in part by a sort of public and psychological wage,” and Melbourn advances a similar assertion: he avers that northern consent to the institution of slavery provides laboring whites with the ideological benefits of white supremacy, but at the expense of their more tangible economic wellbeing.⁹² Abolitionists have recognized this disjunction, but they have not acted upon it. Instead, abolitionists like Lundy address moral appeals to southern elites, the citizens who gain the most from the proslavery status quo; and abolitionists like Thornton present their alternative models for reform only to other abolitionists, the citizens who already acknowledge the extent of southern sectional domination. Melbourn therefore proclaims that abolitionists need to present calculations of “profit and loss” instead of principles of human rights, and they need to speak, above all, to the northern working class. Only by emphasizing that proslavery

⁹¹ Ibid., 160-1, 65.

⁹² W.E.B. Du Bois, *Black Reconstruction in America: An Essay Toward a History of the Part Which Black Folk Played in the Attempt to Reconstruct Democracy in America* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2007 [1935]), 573; Barbara Jeanne Fields, “Slavery, Race and Ideology in the United States of America,” *New Left Review* 181 (May-June 1990): 95-118, 116n44; Roediger, *The Wages of Whiteness*, 60.

rule enables an economic system “partial, unequal, unjust, and oppressive...to the laboring poor” would abolitionists be able to actualize the long-latent possibility of an alliance between abolition and labor.⁹³ And only by creating such an alliance would abolitionists be able to “build up a political party which will ever attract to its standard a majority of the people.” The answer to a national polity controlled by southern elites was a northern political coalition founded upon economic interests, a political coalition that affirmed the value of the common laborer and channeled the power of the working class.⁹⁴

Hammond thus presented the compelling platform for abolitionist politics that Garnet had attempted but failed to construct. He recognized, however, that white reformist possibilities failed to elucidate his vision for northern sectional emancipation, and he seized upon the conduit to blackness that writing as Melbourn afforded in order to proclaim the insurrectionary potential of political force. Melbourn, like Thornton, grasps the extent to which white northerners consent to the tyranny of proslavery rule. During his travels through the country he witnesses “the influence of executive patronage...controlled by a slaveholding president” induce politicians from the free states to change their votes; he observes Congressman Joseph Varnum – “a slave of the south from Massachusetts” – introduce a bill to the House of Representatives to provide funds for imprisoning suspected fugitives from slavery; he sees a convention of white New Yorkers pass a resolution disenfranchising free blacks so as to prove “the fealty” of an ostensibly “independent state” to the “southern dynasty.” But unlike Thornton (and unlike Adams), Melbourn understands from experience that “the relation between master and slave is that of war

⁹³ Hammond, *Life and Opinions of Julius Melbourn*, 209, 231; John Ashworth, *Slavery, Capitalism, and Politics in the Antebellum Republic, Volume 1: Commerce and Compromise, 1820-1850* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1995), 160-2; Eric Foner, “Abolition and the Labor Movement in Ante-bellum America” in *Politics and Ideology in the Age of Civil War* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1980), 63, 68; Roediger, *The Wages of Whiteness*, 46-7, 68, 87.

⁹⁴ Hammond, *Life and Opinions of Julius Melbourn*, 223.

– unmitigated and interminable.” He notes, for example, that St. John ceased his “beastly attempts” upon Maria only after he “grasped [his] knife” and informed St. John that he was “a dead man” if he “persisted in his nefarious course.” Melbourn concludes that the war against southern slaveholders is necessarily an “*exterminating war*” that can be won only through the use of insurrectionary force.⁹⁵

Juxtaposing white politics and black insurrection, Hammond ultimately used literary blackface to suggest that an antislavery political coalition would and should constitute an insurrectionary challenge to the political status quo. For when Melbourn argues that the black slave “is a prisoner to his master, not by natural or moral right, but by physical force alone,” and when Melbourn claims that slaves have to respond to the force of their oppressors with their own insurrectionary show of force, his prescriptions were intended to speak to the sectional relationship between northerners and southerners.⁹⁶ Slaves, according to Melbourn, need to meet force with force, and white northerners, according to Hammond’s program, needed to challenge their political servitude with political force. Northern abolitionists and laborers had to channel their numerical might in order to uproot the political and economic conditions that impelled northern consent to proslavery rule. Just as Melbourn’s criticisms of white abolitionist possibilities indicated that Hammond deemed the liberation of white northerners a prerequisite to the liberation of black slaves, Melbourn’s espousal of insurrection indicated that Hammond conceived of the political emancipation of northerners in insurrectionary terms. Blackface, which had traditionally expressed northern class relations and which had provided what the literary scholar Eric Lott has termed “an idiom of class dissent,” was now being employed by Hammond to interpret sectional relations and to offer an idiom of political dissent, an idiom of

⁹⁵ Ibid., 104, 169, 232, 32-3, 237.

⁹⁶ Ibid., 104.

insurrection that held that the proslavery status quo would crumble without the ready assent of northern voters.⁹⁷ Whereas Garnet had advanced political action and insurrection as two dichotomous responses to northern sectional servitude, then, Hammond's appropriation of slave rebellion to elucidate northern political ends allowed him to amalgamate these possibilities; asserting that northerners could regain their freedom through the practice of a politics that was insurrectionary.

After the *Life and Opinions of Julius Melbourn* was published, its reviewers spent more time debating its authenticity than they did contemplating its argument. A book review in *The National Era* noted a debate in the pages of *The Richmond Whig* over the "accuracy" of Melbourn's narrative, and the anonymous reviewer commented only in passing that "the Anti-Slavery question occupies...a larger space than any other." More prominent abolitionists who reviewed Hammond's account were equally dismissive. Wendell Phillips stressed that "the work itself is a fiction" and that "the contrivance of the book strikes us as clumsy," and though he granted that "the author has made use of the details of slave life" to such an effect that "the unconscious truth and accuracy of the picture...would sometimes, perhaps, make you think it a true story," he ended by castigating the anonymous author as "some democrat who fancies himself as abolitionist." Frederick Douglass, in turn, reprinted a review from *The Boston Courier* that merely mentioned the work's "rambling political disquisitions" and underscored the extent to which its ghostwriter "is so palpably ignorant of artistic story-telling." Hammond had put on blackface to transcend the myopia of abolitionist orthodoxy: the inability of his

⁹⁷ Lott, *Love and Theft*, 84.

abolitionist reviewers to grasp even the outlines of his program for northern emancipation exposed it.⁹⁸

⁹⁸ *The National Era*, 12 August 1847; *The Liberator* 26 November 1847; *The North Star* 21 April 1848.

Conclusion

Jabez Delano Hammond's amalgamation of the northern need for sectional emancipation with the possibility of slave insurrection failed to permeate the abolitionist discourse of the late 1840s. By the early 1850s, however, the political terrain that informed sectional relations between North and South had shifted. More northerners began to perceive that a proslavery tyranny undergirded the national status quo, and they began to grasp for strands of political discourse that corresponded to their new understanding of sectional power. Northerners both abolitionist and merely antislavery sought a conceivable model for northern sectional liberation, and some embraced a Hammond-like use of literary blackface in order to articulate their calls for northern political defiance.

The burgeoning of free labor ideology in the 1850s spurred a growing number of northerners, black and white, to recognize that the economics of slavery opposed the economic interests of non-slaveholding whites.⁹⁹ Yet this emerging realization among the masses of northern whites impelled a parallel realization among the members of the southern elite. As they acknowledged that they could no longer rely upon northern consent to maintain the proslavery national order, slaveholders attempted to bolster their supremacy through the exercise of state-sanctioned force. They pushed successfully for the continued prosecution of the Mexican War, and their disunionist threats assured the passage of the Fugitive Slave Law in 1850. Such triumphs proved costly, however, for they worked to underscore a conceptualization of a "slave

⁹⁹ John Ashworth, *Slavery, Capitalism, and Politics in the Antebellum Republic, Volume 1: Commerce and Compromise, 1820-1850* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1995), 80, 126.

power,” a cabal of southern despots to which northerners needed to respond if they were to regain their ideological independence and discover their own sectional power.¹⁰⁰

Northerners with diverse antislavery allegiances responded to the slave power, as had Hammond, by appropriating the violent undercurrents of slave discontent to speak to the North’s need for sectional emancipation. In 1852 Frederick Douglass, erstwhile Garrisonian, published “The Heroic Slave,” a novella that portrayed the 1841 slave revolt led by Madison Washington aboard the slave ship *Creole*. Celebrating a mutiny that was insurrectionary and a slave who bore the name Washington, Douglass strove to accentuate the dominant yet contingent character of slavery in the United States. He presented Washington and his co-conspirators claiming “their rightful freedom” through violent force, and he employed Washington’s insurrectionary voice to proclaim that “the ocean, if not the land, is free.” At the same time, though, Douglass used the voice of Tom Grant, the ship’s first mate, to suggest that “the land” was unfree only because proslavery southerners had at their command “the whole physical force of the government.” And by juxtaposing political power with slave insurrection, Douglass recalibrated the history of the *Creole* revolt to advance a program for challenging proslavery supremacy. The slaves’ efforts proved that through violent insurrection the oppressed could make a slave ship a free ship, and they implied that through political insurrection – through a practice of politics that sought to wrest from southern elites the “force of the government” – the oppressed could foster the same sort of liberating transformation on board the ship of state. The story bore messages for black and white Americans.¹⁰¹

¹⁰⁰ Matthew Mason, *Slavery and Politics in the Early Republic* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2006), 231.

¹⁰¹ Frederick Douglass, “The Heroic Slave” (Radford: Wilder Publications, 2008 [1852]), 63, 65, 56.

One of the few antislavery writers who could equal Douglass's national renown, Harriet Beecher Stowe followed up her bestselling *Uncle Tom's Cabin* (1852) with *Dred* (1856), a novel in which she no longer depicted black characters simply to win support for abolition but put on blackface to channel the political and sectional discord she observed throughout the country.¹⁰² Stowe argued that "the system of slavery" needed to be interpreted through "the views and reasonings of those who have bowed down to the yoke," and she therefore presented her analysis of sectional politics through Harry, a well-educated slave who despairs that the "wealth, power, and religion" of the North "consents [to] and justifies" a proslavery national order. Even as she used Harry to communicate her understanding of northern subservience, however, she privileged the insurrectionary sentiments of her black title character to pronounce a plan for reorienting the sectional balance of power. For when Dred emerges from the Dismal Swamp to disparage Harry's vacillating allegiances to his white master and his enslaved brethren and orders Harry to heed "the martial trumpet [that] now is blowing," Stowe intended his commentary to offer an analysis of a North vacillating between its traditional support for proslavery rule and its latent desire for sectional independence. Only by realizing, as Dred realizes, that those who "will bear the yoke, *may* bear it," could northerners counteract southern attempts to "make slaves" of them. Only by heeding the call of the North's martial trumpet, the platform of the Republican Party, could northerners challenge proslavery supremacy. Only by appreciating the perspective of an insurrectionary slave, in other words, did Stowe believe that northerners, like Harry, could find a way out of an enslaved America.¹⁰³

¹⁰² The literary scholar Robert S. Levine notes that along with Preston Brook's caning of Charles Sumner, "the battles in 'bleeding Kansas' led Stowe to write a novel that is less hopeful...than *Uncle Tom's Cabin*." Harriet Beecher Stowe, *Dred: A Tale of the Great Dismal Swamp*, ed. Robert S. Levine (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2000 [1856]), xiii-xiv.

¹⁰³ Stowe, *Dred*, 445, 500, 200, 341.

As the 1850s drew to a close, the Republican Party reconstituted Hammond's politics of insurrection. The new, overtly sectional party extended to whites a clear political identity that did not need blackface to make insurrectionary claims. Party leaders such as New York Senator William H. Seward wore this Republican identity to conflate politics and insurrection. A Whig-turned-Republican who had maintained an active correspondence with Hammond over the years, Seward possessed a trenchant understanding of the North's political submission to what he termed "the governmental organization of the slaveholding class." Yet by decade's end Seward no longer dwelt upon the betrayal of "the non-slaveholding classes in the free states...even to their own interests"; instead, he began to characterize the North's blossoming political consciousness in insurrectionary terms.¹⁰⁴ Speaking before Congress on March 3, 1858, he claimed that the North had "at last apprehended its rights, its interests, its power, and its destiny," and was "organizing itself to assume the government of the Republic." Northerners grasped that their relations with the South embodied "a dynastic struggle of two antagonistical systems...for mastery of the Union," and they now sought to channel their collective political might not merely to halt the spread of slavery but also to "invade" the bulwarks of southern rule: the slave states themselves. Seward insisted that the force of northern ballots was necessary to overturn the proslavery rule, for he emphasized in his subsequent "Irrepressible Conflict" speech that southerners could only be "permanently dislodged from the government" if the North exercised its political power "to confound and overthrow, by one decisive blow, the betrayers of the constitution and freedom." According to Seward's analysis, northern sectional emancipation necessitated the fulfillment of northern political promise, a promise so potent and so counter to

¹⁰⁴ *The Works of William H. Seward*, vol. 4, ed. George E. Baker (Boston: Houghton, Mifflin and Company, 1884), 267, 273; Donald R. Roper, "Hammond, Jabez Delano," *American National Biography*, vol. 9, eds. John A. Garraty and Mark C. Carnes (New York: Oxford University Press, 1999), 955.

the status quo that Seward deemed it insurrectionary. Refusing allegiance to American proslavery ideology represented a political revolution.¹⁰⁵

Discourse shapes political reality even as it is itself produced in political context, and the proliferation of an insurrectionary conception of northern political action contributed mightily to the breakdown of national harmony in the 1850s United States. From John Quincy Adams's awareness of northern political bondage and Henry Highland Garnet's dissemination of political and insurrectionary possibilities, Hammond connected the white North's need for sectional emancipation with the black slave's recourse to violent insurrection. His intellectual production gained political traction as first Douglass and Stowe in their fiction, and then Seward in his speeches, responded to the ferment of sectional discourse by channeling and promulgating Hammond's insurrectionary understanding of politics. Yet this implementation of the language of insurrection had destructive consequences. The southern elites who read the North's insurrectionary literary productions – the white southerners whose direct interactions with black slaves made them acutely sensitive to the dangers of insurrection – began to interpret them as avowals “of a distinct design on the part of the Republicans to wage fierce and unrelenting and bloody war upon slavery wherever it exists,” and in response southern fire-eaters commenced an organized push for secession.¹⁰⁶ Appropriating the fetters of black bondage to articulate their political enslavement and the specter of black insurrection to imagine their political

¹⁰⁵ *Congressional Globe*, 35th Congress, 1st Session, 1857-1858, 939, 944; *Works of William H. Seward*, 295, 302. Analyzing these speeches, Elizabeth R. Varon states that Seward employed “the language of invasion” and “martial imagery” to suggest the prospects for “a violent conquest, with free labor forces on the offensive,” while Leonard L. Richards notes that “Seward invariably concluded his speeches with a call to arms.” Yet neither situates Seward's violent evocations within the terrain of insurrectionary discourse. Elizabeth R. Varon, *Disunion! The Coming of the American Civil War, 1789-1859* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2008), 309, 318-319; Leonard L. Richards, *The Slave Power: The Free North and Southern Domination, 1780-1860* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 2000), 10.

¹⁰⁶ Quoted in Varon, *Disunion!*, 321.

emancipation, northerners ultimately presented to southerners the political portents of violent warfare. And the war came.

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